

on spec

the canadian magazine of the fantastic

FALL 2005

#62 vol 17 no 3

www.onspec.ca

\$5.95



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On Spec is published quarterly through the volunteer efforts of The Copper Pig Writers' Society, a registered non-profit society. Annual subscriptions are \$22.00 in Canada for individuals, and \$30.00 for institutions (price includes GST). GST# 123625295. Full subscription rates are on Page 2, and on our website, at: www.onspec.ca

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Publication and promotion of this issue have been made possible by financial assistance from Alberta Community Development, Arts Development Branch through The Alberta Foundation for the Arts; The Department of Canadian Heritage; The Canada Council for the Arts; the Edmonton Arts Council (City of Edmonton); and Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development. Our special thanks goes out to Clear Lake Ltd. and Jena Snyder for 16 years of dedication and support.

On Spec is a member of the Canadian Magazine Publishers Association (CMPA), and is distributed in Canada by the CMPA.. Printed in Edmonton, Canada, by Capital Colour Press. Postage paid at Edmonton AB, Canada.

PUBLICATIONS MAIL AGREEMENT NO. 40063520, REGISTRATION NO. 08148
RETURN UNDELIVERABLE CANADIAN ADDRESSES TO:
ON SPEC: P.O. BOX 4727, EDMONTON, AB T6E 5G6
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on spec

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"Lesztoe" © Jeff Lyons

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What Do Aliens Want?

Steve Mohn, Fiction Editor

Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* is like watching a tea kettle steam fun for a moment. Pedestrians burst into clouds of dust as the Martian tripods, lying in wait for, lo, these many centuries, get jolted out of the ground, and start marauding. H. G. Wells had his invaders land inside bullets fired from a huge gun. So did the 1938 avant-garde Orson Welles broadcast, and so did the cheesy 1953 George Pal movie, where the tripods became modernist gooseneck lamps on floating Danish Modern coffee tables. There truly is no accounting for taste, but form often does follow function accidentally. If a rocket is a bomb with a hole in one end, then a big gun might fire hollow-point bullets from the red planet. Spielberg's notion of buried terror may echo TMA-1, which Stanley Kubrick dug up on the moon, but at least that slab had a definite job to do: signal Those Who Must Be Informed. The tripods of Wells' story are prisoner-taking multitasking striders, burners and poison gassers. But they are not invulnerable, and they are not legion. Spielberg's tripods, met with (let's face it) superior American assault technology, throw up that old stand-by, the force field. If Martians are so smart, how come they never heard of germs?

In Wells' day, germs were still new enough that you could turn to them for an ironic twist. Also, his Martians are obliged to build everything they need, bang together their equipment on site, even smelt the ores and refine the metals they require. They wallow on the ground, hobbled not only by gravity and a rich air mix but by their corpulence. The world was simpler then. Its physical details limited the dire imagination to somewhat level playing fields. It is possible early in Wells' tale to knock the stilts out from under a Martian fighting machine and leave it thrashing in the river, incontinently discharging ruddy crud. "That's the spirit!" as Roy Bady said. If you cannot lose there's nothing to fight about. A truly superior being will just tell you what to do. Being truly inferior, you'll do it.

Achilles' mortal heel shows that even gods can't think of everything. It is unfair to criticize Wells' Martians for not anticipating colds and flu. But if you modernize *The War of the Worlds* to suit your own time, as everyone has, even David Ossman's 50th anniversary

rebroadcast, then you find yourself stuck with nineteenth-century ironies and conventions. Germs aside, why this vampirism? The Martians drink blood, and human blood is fine with them, never mind that they've never had it. Drinking blood is the vilest thing because blood is the fluid of vitality—or was in the Nineteenth Century. And Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, who thrived on the blood of young women, came to readers one year before *The War of the Worlds*. Blood-sucking was all the rage, and Wells needed a reason for his Martians to invade. Red planet. Blood was the narrative gift that kept giving.

But it's silly in any SFnal context of alien invasion abetted by technological va-voom! So the aliens of *Independence Day* more resourcefully meant to strip the Earth of its minerals. (Did that include hydrogen oxide?) They too had a force field. They, too, all looked alike and never wore clothes. Within their large brain pans lurked the intellects of chicken stranglers. Of yet simpler appetite were the aliens of the *Alien* franchise, who lived only to eat, sleep and make more aliens. But they offer a fair description of what most life on Earth likes to do. This could explain why we enjoy them. These aliens make sense. They would watch TV.

The alien motivation Wells did not pursue was territoriality. Dominance is universal and highly developed among vertebrates. The alpha male clouts the lesser males and hogs the females, ensuring that his seed will survive unto the next and even the Nth generations. As an evolutionary survival gambit, it cuts to the chase. So I like better the threat of aliens who arrive to push us aside. We do it all the time and lesser species adapt or die. Wells' aliens are leaving behind a cold arid planet that even a global canal network couldn't save. They've tried everything; time to migrate. Naturally, they would cultivate something martian to eat. That red weed, perhaps. Humans would struggle to grow wheat and corn. The Martians would spray herbicide—and so on...

It would lack the drive and bite of armed conflict, but *The Abyss* of 1989 is a nice example of aliens trying to mind their own business. The aliens of *Taken*, a Roswell-inspired miniseries, inflict themselves on people for reasons so hard to pin down that their determined curiosity feels genuine. Their cousins in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, for all their cute music, are just dropping off and picking up new specimens. (If you lived on the ocean floor, our occasional visits might leave you just as awed and flummoxed: What the hell was that?) Perhaps the best representation of human/alien confoundment comes late in *Gwyneth*

Jones' exasperating novel, *White Queen*, in which a human killing provokes the aliens to perform a group dance. They look human enough to pass for people in the dark but they are not like us. The minds of whales, suddenly revealed, would make more immediate sense. This feels reliably observed.

But most aliens come to conquer. So did the Spanish. Their impoverished colonies reflected their rapacity. The British, primarily concerned with trade, left behind a commonwealth (as well as upstart breakaways) that to this day includes the world's wealthiest nations and largest democracies. Today, wars of conquest are far too dangerous, and much too expensive, to wage. So Spielberg's *Martians*, and the Roswellites of *Independence Day*, are throwback fantasies that can't even convince us that they really reflect terrorist fears. But a terrorist is a man without an army, with only improvised weapons and an all-consuming wrath. No alien force hitting Earth can accurately reflect fears of train-station bombers or aircraft hijackers. Spielberg's tripods are a sensational equivalent of helicopter gunships, routing out insurgents. But he's rarely careful with a metaphor. So when Dakota Fanning screams: "Is it the terrorists?" it feels cheap and opportunistic. (Sure, she might say that; but it's being said to us, the audience.)

How much better it would have been to film *The War of the Worlds*, just for once, in period, in England and faithfully, with green smoke leaking from the joints of the striding machines. Once, Tim Burton might have done it. There is a lot to what William Gibson meant when he said of SF generally: "This stuff dates fast." And the worst of it is bad because of that. But the best of it defies conceptual rot because it does not stake everything on one FX monster. In a preface to his SF tales, Wells said that in such stories "the living interest lies in their non-fantastic elements and not in the invention itself." He meant characters but also he meant the sheer journalistic accomplishment of reporting the event, courageously and as completely as possible. Just as time-travel stories must be understood as a kind of travel writing, all SF must pursue its need to report. Orson Welles got it right. And he got it from Herbert George Wells. •

Correction: In my essay, "Time-Travel Template," (On Spec #49) I foolishly identified the AI, Vox, as being played by Orlando Bloom. It was Orlando Jones. I regret the error.

This is the 'clean' depression.
A chrome-plated depression,
a depression made of glass.
You won't see it on the
streets because the skeleton
of the economy is still intact,
not like it was then.

Kenny's Beach

Kevin Cockle

Ken 'call me Kenny' Daimler got up early that morning, because no matter what—getting up early was a successful habit. That hadn't changed. There were things you did if you wanted to be the best, and things you didn't do. He read the paper out of New York online, read the local news over coffee down at the corner latte joint. Got a shoe-shine over at Balji's, not that the week-old Clarks really needed it, but still. Haircut, again, more of a ritual than a necessity—his short brown locks never got out of control. Pietro the barber talked about his family: third daughter—his youngest—getting married. Kenny offered his congratulations. Tipped the man five bucks.

"Hope Is Not a Plan," the keen, slightly nasal voice on the CD reminded Kenny on the drive home. It was the voice of Aubrey Scott, motivational speaker, performance coach, and economic guru—the best of the post-crash breed of survival experts. "You've got to stay active—don't let the economic depression get between your ears. Write your goals down on a contract—a contract between you and yourself. Decide how you're going to get there—list the steps, and then every day, in little ways, take a step forward. Sitting there worrying is not going to help you. Meet people. Always position yourself to meet people and make use of their skills. There's a surplus of talent out there now, waiting to be re-energized, re-integrated. Make yourself

the nexus of that new web of associates. Be the hub. Remember the hub-and-spokes network model we spoke of, and live it.”

Kenny had heard it all before of course, had spent the money to see Scott in person, but there was a comforting feel to having the lessons hammered home. Millions of professionals had swarmed to coaching seminars when the ground beneath their feet gave way, but how many of them had actually applied what they’d been taught? Not too fucking many, Kenny thought, lips tight in a smug line across his clean-shaven face. “*Adapt Or Die*” was a favourite axiom of Scott’s and Kenny was living proof of the truth of those words.

“This isn’t like the thirties,” the lecture continued, Scott’s voice reverberating slightly in the large concert hall, the odd cough or rustle audible from the audience, “the ‘Dirty Thirties’ with its dust bowls and breadlines. This is the ‘clean’ depression. A chrome-plated depression, a depression made of glass. You won’t see it on the streets because the skeleton of the economy is still intact, not like it was then. Central governments are smarter now—deregulating instead of choking off liquidity. When a corporate lawyer loses his job, he can resurface in a factory or coffee shop somewhere—the floor is higher than it was then. This is merely a collapse of deadwood, a shearing away of the useless, a steely-eyed call against all those who had been bluffing. This is not total catatonia. Those that fall down can pick themselves up again, because the infrastructure is still there—you have all the tools, you just have to have the will to put them to use. Don’t be afraid to Take A Step Back, In Order To Take Two Steps Forward. Fear is your true enemy now.”

Kenny nodded—fear was indeed the killer—had eaten his office up like a horde of army ants. Kenny had felt it too, but he hadn’t been paralyzed, hadn’t been afraid to adapt. He’d gotten out of finance, even with no clear exit-strategy, and it had been a good instinct. Those who had stayed, hoping that things would just return to normal, had been clobbered by the wave of fiduciary-duty suits that wiped the industry clean like a scalding nuclear wind. *Adapt Or Die*—you just couldn’t get away from it. It was Truth in electric pink neon, written on a billboard ten stories high.

Kenny parked underground, took the elevator twelve floors up to his unit. The highrise-condo had a talismanic effect on Kenny, part of the concrete evidence that proved he wasn’t just one of the survivors—he was one of the winners. Place wasn’t big, but he didn’t need it to be and it had a spectacular view of the river valley. The whole south-

facing balcony window was retractable, opening the living room up on a summer night to cool breezes and dim stars. Kenny had paid the thing off not one year before the collapse, and as a result, he had been able to get liquid with a second mortgage from the government crisis fund when the shit hit the fan. So in a way, the place had saved his life just as surely as if it had pulled him from the surf, and given him mouth-to-mouth. The things Kenny had, the physical things he owned, weren't just objects or assets to him, separate and apart. He was what he had; he was what he did. And so was everyone else, no matter what they said.

Kenny checked his computer for messages, and there were dozens. Requests for introductions. Network associates looking to hook him up with new names. Women inquiring about his availability on the weekend. Jacob Tanner with a squash date booked. A group of friends planning a movie Friday night. Aubrey Scott had drilled home the importance of personal networking in the post-crash world, and Kenny had taken it to heart. "Things Are Wide Open Now," Scott was fond of saying, and a man with no network might just as well go into the shotgun-swallowing business. And that wasn't just a rhetorical shotgun. Kenny still remembered Sandra's gurgling, choked voice over the phone, calling from the office: "Sean... oh God, Kenny... Sean's shot himself. He's in the bullpen. We've called the paramedics." If Kenny hadn't already made up his mind to quit the investment biz at that point, Sean's brains streaming down the china-blue wall at McAffrey & Co. would have been a compelling signal.

Kenny had time for a nap, shower, change of clothes before the prospect-meeting at the country club. The rich people who were left were richer than anybody had ever dreamed rich people could get, and they still required servicing. You needed to be able to get to them, know who they knew, play where they played and look the part when you got there. Kenny's appointment for the evening was the kind of client who could take Daimler "To The Next Level" just through association. Just being seen at the same table as the guy would send out ripples, and Kenny wanted to be well-rested for the event. If he slept until 4:30 or so, that would be perfect.

As Kenny breezed into his bedroom, there on the wall, in an elegant silver frame was a large, high-gloss photo that had come to represent everything Kenny stood for, everything he aspired to. It was of a glorious white-sand beach—palm fronds drooping down in the foreground—and impossible indigo water, all under a thrilling

Polynesian sky with the caption "SUCCESS" written in no-uncertain terms along the bottom. He had bought it four years ago, the very day he had quit his job, the day the banks had gone under and the Third World had slipped off the map altogether: out of sight, out of mind. He had been determined to keep his place in line while millions scrambled, faltered, lost ground, and lost faith all around him. Only the toughest and smartest were going to make it. Survival of the fittest.

Kenny D was one of the fit.

• • •

6:00 p.m. sharp, Kenny strode the foyer of the Lions Golf and Country Club, sensing the crisp, clean whiteness of his suit in the reflection from the marble floors, long wall-mirrors, and golden fixtures of the hall. It had almost broken him in the beginning—keeping up his membership—but ultimately it had proven worth it. Karl Benning, the prospect, wouldn't even have looked at him if he weren't on the roll, and certainly wouldn't have trusted him.

The maître d' met him at the entrance to the dining room with a nod and a sombre, "Mr. Daimler," beckoning for Kenny to come through to the patio. The summer sun blazed in a cloudless sky, washing the perfectly manicured grounds in hard, white light, lending an incandescence to the white tablecloths and gray, veined-marble rail. Kenny ordered a club soda, set up his lap-top under a large, fairway-green umbrella, made sure of his connection. At 6:05 Karl Benning strode onto the patio, charcoal jacket and dark shirt contrasting with the whitewashed surroundings: a figure in acrylic, painted onto a watercolour backdrop.

"Kenny," Karl smiled, extending a hand while undoing his jacket button.

"Karl," Kenny said.

"How's the slice?"

"Killing me as usual." Kenny had been part of a four with Karl two weeks ago. Benning had asked what line Kenny was in, as Kenny knew he would: the men exchanged cards. "Let's enjoy our game," Kenny had said, as though golf were not an intimate part of his business.

"We'll talk later."

Benning ordered a Glenfiddich, moved his chair around so he could see Kenny's plasma screen. "I'm interested to see what you've got for me."

"Did you want to have something to eat?" Kenny asked, not wanting to rush things. "No problem for me if..."

"I actually can't stick around tonight," Karl said with a smile. "Wife's got some sort of a function I've got to go to. She's sorry she couldn't be here by the way."

"No problem." Kenny clicked his mouse, revealing his personal logo coverage. He clicked the mouse again, "Karl, we really haven't discussed what your needs and goals are." Frames jumped up: Products, Services, Consultation. "Have you had much previous experience with this before or..."

"I know what I want, I think." Karl said, rubbing his chin with his hand as he hunched forward at the screen. Kenny clicked on products to reveal a long line of thumbnails. Zippermasks. Soft-cuffs, hard-cuffs. Body leather. Ball-gags: black and tan. Silk rope. Restraining ribbon. A variety of suspensers. The pain implements: cat o' nines, riding crops, low-volt shockers. Pleasure implements: lotions, vibrators, strap-on dicks (dumb and micro-wired), VR programs and hardware.

"How is the VR stuff?" Karl asked, never taking his olive-coloured eyes from the screen.

"Not bad—it's coming along. Frankly, for the expense, I think the effects are still a little clunky. Bodysuit's a little clammy, in my opinion." Kenny scrolled down slowly: CD-ROM collections—nostalgic stuff—Victory Studios type black and white picture sets, old comic-books from the 1950s greats. How-to manuals: book, CD-ROM, DVD. "Oil's Well That Ends Well". "Applying The Lash: A Beginner's Guide".

"Sodomy for dummies," Karl quipped. Kenny chuckled on tempo —like an easy backswing 75 yards from the green.

"You offer consultation?"

"Certainly," Kenny said, with the voice that had once convinced people to buy Canadian mutual funds. "I'm really the quarterback—I work with a network of knowledgeable professionals in a number of different fields. Once we zero in on your interests, we can create a lifestyle plan and I'll put you in touch with the necessary experts. Even if you're not exactly sure what direction you'd like to take, I can structure an experience-path for you, make it a real exploration. Often you know, that's the way to go. I have a number of testimonials you can review on download—a lot of people really enjoy the variety."

Karl took the mouse—Kenny relinquished it without hesitation. Benning stared at the screen as he clicked, chewing absently on his thin lower lip.

"Pain's part of it... I don't know. I've got some technical problems to get around I'd appreciate your guidance on."

"For yourself, or..."

"I'll be punishing someone," Karl smiled, cutting his eyes from the screen to Kenny. "Some bitches need to suffer. You know?"

Kenny grinned back, but a red flag came up. You wanted a client with a clear separation between fantasy and reality. A guy wanted to berate his wife with a little spicy-talk in the bedroom—that was fine, but business was business. Kenny was an experience facilitator: it wasn't really ever appropriate to refer to a client's wife as a bitch in a meeting.

"With pain experimentation, it's important to keep safety in mind," emphasized Kenny. "I'd usually recommend a couple of the more comprehensive manuals along with any purchase of equipment. With some of these things—the whips for instance—I'll have a trained device-master come to your home and demonstrate technique and intensity levels. Amateurs can accidentally over-do it sometimes, and a bad initial experience can really be off-putting."

"I don't think that'll be a problem." Something about Karl's voice raised more red flags in Kenny's brain, maybe even set off the odd klaxon. Benning didn't have the air of embarrassed curiosity most of Kenny's bored, wealthy clients had. He was selling fantasy after all: it wasn't ever really about the damage inflicted.

"You know, it might be a good idea to get your wife involved in one of these meetings," Kenny said. It was unusual for the husband only to take an initial meeting: the wives were almost always the decision-makers on these things.

Karl smiled, reached into his breast pocket, took out his wallet. He slid a photograph out of the credit card fold, placed it on the table. Kenny swallowed. The photograph was of a young girl—maybe ten or twelve, made up to look much older. She had wispy, fine gold hair, teased with hairspray, and was shown wearing sunglasses and garish lipstick like a movie star at a pool. She smiled into the camera, tops of small teeth just barely visible in that dolphin grin. "My wife won't really have much to say about this," Karl said. "I've heard about safe places for certain liaisons, certain services available that offer a protective umbrella against prying third parties, pesky law-enforcement types—that sort of thing. Price, Kenny, would be no object. Do you think you'd be able to help me out along those lines?"

Things Were Wide Open These Days. The law had been laid bare as a device of social order in the face of financial devastation, and as

such, was really only a club held over the heads of the great unwashed at this point. If you were making money, not setting any fires, paying your taxes—government didn't want to get in your way. You could do a lot, you just couldn't rub the government's face in it. But some things were still taboo, would still be investigated and pursued no matter how wealthy the participants.

Kenny had a dilemma on his hands.

If he didn't provide the services Benning wanted, Karl would get them elsewhere. Kenny wasn't the only experience facilitator at the club. He felt the others circling about him like phantom barracudas, waiting for him to lose his nerve.

On the other hand, if he did procure the services for Benning, and Benning was caught...

How many times had Kenny sold hedge funds to senior citizens back before the crash? Hedges were sophisticated instruments, and who really understood Black-Scholes equations anyway? But they had been the only way to make money before the end. You had to have them, if you were an investor. You had to sell them, if you were an adviser. Or how many times had he sold the 'fact' of market cyclicalities—that the best time to buy was when you had the money, because things always went up eventually? Sure, you couldn't promise that—not in any scientific way, but again, if things went down, you had an opportunity to dollar-cost-average in. Right?

Kenny had been down this road before. You did what you could sleep with.

"I do believe I might have something for you," Kenny said, managing to keep his voice from cracking. Benning was staring at him now. Staring hard. Challenging Kenny's fitness to survive. "There is a... I can refer you to a specialist. She'd really be your starting point for this sort of thing." Kenny smiled—nothing wrong at all here, no worries—and produced a card. It was black, with elegant gold script—a woman's name, contact numbers. Benning took the card, considered it.

"Cynara Wynter?"

"I know—sounds like a hairdresser," Kenny laughed, a little too hard. "You call her, give her your details. She'll require a face to face meeting, but I can guarantee you this: if this is really what you're looking for, she'll take care of you."

"Guarantee?" Karl grinned, small teeth visible behind that tell-tale Dolphin curve.

"Absolutely," Kenny's voice dropped into a closer's tone. You used

magic words like guarantee, absolute, certain, when you wanted that signature on the dotted line. "It won't be cheap."

Karl straightened, satisfied, slipped the card into his breast pocket. He smiled, extended his hand. "Thank you for your time, Kenny," Karl said. "And thank you for the contact."

"Discretion assured Karl," Kenny said as he shook the man's hand. "That goes without saying." And Karl Benning pushed his chair back, stood up, buttoned his jacket and left the patio.

Kenny stayed for a quick drink, alone, at his table—a double Chivas, rocks. He stared onto the expanse of lawn under the summer sun: that deep, dark green... edging against the cobalt sky in vivid contrast. He signed the member's cheque and hastily made his way to the lot. Crushed stones made a crunching noise underfoot as he walked to his Lexus, and he almost found his key before his knees gave way. He bent forward, trying to get to the line of grass as tension vomit burst from behind his lips, shaking his torso again and again with heaving spasms. He straightened, looked around: there were few other cars and nobody watching. He wiped his lips and got into his car, heart galloping beneath his crisp white shirt.

He took a moment to focus, get his hands to stop shaking, then he reached for the glove compartment box. Inside was a cell-phone: flat pea green, metal, heavier than normal. Kenny figured it for military but he really didn't know. He flipped it open and hit the auto-dial.

Three rings. "Hello?" A woman's voice. Kenny could almost smell the bubble gum, see the bottle-blonde hair: she sounded so young.

"Yeah," Kenny cleared his throat. "Is this... um..."

The voice softened, but got older at the edges. Now she was in her mid-thirties, maybe. "Who is this?"

"Oh, uh, it's Ken... Kenny Daimler."

"Kenny D? Wow. Man, I'm surprised you've never called before. I've seen your numbers—you're a real mover and shaker. Kenny, let me ask you a question."

"Yeah. Okay."

"Are you using my phone, the green one?"

"God! Yes of course."

"Kenny you'd be surprised," Cynara drawled, like she had been asleep when he called, "the first time people call me, some of the shit they pull. I can see you're not like that. You've got it together, man. You're ice cold."

"Thanks."

"Hey, no problem." Cynara sounded like she might be rolling over in bed, or taking a moment to butt out a cigarette. "So, Ken," she continued, "What's the what babe?"

"I've, uh... given your card to someone. Made a referral."

"Yeah. Well okay Ken. I guess you've looked at the situation and figure there's no other recourse right?"

"Yes. He's... he's the type who'd expose... things. Eventually."

"Well, relax. You've done the right thing. Kenny are you sitting down?"

"Yeah?"

"Okay, 'cause I'm gonna run through it now, alright? I want you to be absolutely clear on how this is going to go."

"Okay."

"Kenny, what's the mark's name?"

"Karl Benning."

"Okay: Karl Benning. You know I'm going to have to kill Karl Benning and make him disappear, right? You know that's what I do?" Kenny nodded. Twenty percent of his gross revenues went towards collective network expenses, administration, so on and so forth. A good chunk of that, Kenny knew, was directed towards Cynara in "operations". It suddenly dawned on him that he had to speak aloud to communicate via cell-phone. "Yes," he croaked.

"He's going to call the number on the card, but it's a sink number Kenny, off-grid: can't be traced. I'll profile him, make sure he's a candidate for this, get his particulars, then I'll direct him to a meeting place. It's going to be face to face, he's going to come alone and I'll tell him to bring the card for identification: that's the only physical piece of evidence linking him to us. And then I'll take care of him. Trust me Kenny, if he's a true candidate, the sickness just drives them right on in to the trap. They can't help themselves."

"No."

"And we can't have people like Karl Benning out there—you know that. Bad for business all around."

"Yes."

"Alright. Now Kenny, here's the thing: there's not gonna be a body or anything substantial when I'm done, okay? No way anybody's ever gonna know what happened to Karl Benning. But he IS gonna be a missing person, and being rich, somebody's gonna check on him. Probably be a few weeks or months down the road, might not be the real heat, but somebody's probably going to interview you as a last known associate."

"Okay."

"Now I'm asking you right here and now: can you get through that interview? I mean, can you be cool? Just answer the questions, shrug a lot, be truthful, convincing? Can you get through it? Because if you know yourself, and you know there's no way —it's not too late to go and get my card back from Karl."

Kenny thought before answering. "Yes. Yes I can do that."

"Yes you can get my card back, or yes you can get through an interview?"

"The... the interview. I can do that. I can get through it."

"Oh I knew that Kenny, I knew it. I just have to ask, you know? To let you know when it's too late to turn back. Kenny you were a stock-broker or something back in the day, right?"

"Financial Adviser," Kenny said on reflex. "Stockbroker" had become a pejorative in the business: shady characters churning their books; boiler-room types shaking down senior citizens over the phone. Financial advisers were respectable professionals. Like doctors.

"Yeah. Well you know how you guys always used to get sued? This is just like that. Just think of me as your lawyer, keeping your nose out of the shit, looking after your interests. You done good Kenny. I'll take it from here. Take a few days off, get some sleep. Don't worry about a thing." The line went dead, producing no dial tone for several seconds. Kenny folded up the phone and put it back in the compartment.

"I Don't Make Mistakes, I Make Decisions," Kenny repeated to himself, beating down anxiety. He'd always known that he might need the assassin in this line of work. Benning's type and worse were out there: the type who'd force the authorities to act sooner or later and bring the whole damn network down. Even if Kenny didn't do business with Karl Benning directly, the man was still a threat to the system. He had to be dealt with.

I'll just have to live with it, Kenny thought to himself. Live with it, and hope it never came back to haunt him. He prayed Cynara Wynter was as good, as thorough, as professional, as people claimed. He wondered briefly, what she had been before; she sounded like a cocktail waitress. A cocktail waitress who had seen the neon sign, read the truth thereon, and had adapted just fine.

Kenny hit the freeway, rolled the window down to get fresh air sharp against his face. He visualized as he had been taught in meditation class: see the beach, hear the water. Be calm. Be calm.

Breathe. •

Future Poetry

Mary Soon Lee

Will paint itself
On people's retinas
With lasers,
No escaping the message
When rainbow-hued words
Track every eye motion,
Short lines cavorting
For attention.

The lack of meter
May be regrettable,
Likewise the shedding
Of punctuation, capital letters,
And words of more than
Two syllables,
But these losses
Will be compensated
By puffs of scent—
Ozone, lemon peel, burnt toast—
By a burst of aniseed
On the tongue,
Warmth on one's skin.

Poetry will reclaim
Its high throne,
Each adult on Earth
Receiving a daily dose
Of government verse,
The words sealed
By the replicated pressure
Of the President's lips.

Sam's list had gotten long over the years, longer than Zachariah remembered it ever being, but there'd been enough ashes for all the places.

Ashes

J.W. Anderson

Zachariah looked around the pub as he set his glass, empty except for a bit of foam, on the table next to Sam in his urn. The Wanton Woman was quiet. It was still early in the evening and the regulars hadn't yet begun to drift in. The heavy rain was keeping the casual drinkers home, and Easter has lit the coal fires to keep away the chill. There were a few people, scattered among the tables and at the bar, and no one seemed to be particularly interested in their neighbor's business. Except for Zachariah, of course, but he was an experienced professional in other people's business. It would take a more experienced professional to spot him, but only a very few of them existed and he knew all of them by sight. He'd taken his dad's usual corner table. Always have clear lines of sight to entrances and exits. The voice of his training had grown softer over the years, to the point of being almost subliminal, but was still present. Always scout the location of a meet, to make sure there were no surprises. It had become a prayer that recited itself over and again. It had kept him alive through situations that should have killed him, and so he listened. But the Woman hadn't changed since he was a kid, and this had always been the best seat in the house. Dad had always preferred the corner table as well, for much the same reason. Particularly after he'd lost his job in the mines, he'd enjoyed watching people, observing the tides of conversation and

emotion that would run through the pub over the course of an evening.

Easter started the Guinness as soon as he stood up to make his way to the bar. Zachariah gave a wry smile. Easter poured a proper pint, giving it ample time to settle. Guinness had always been his drink, another habit he'd picked up from his dad, just as Sam had acquired a taste for Best from his. Normally, he'd have stopped at one pint, or perhaps before the first pint, but tonight was different. He should worry about drinking too much, he knew that, particularly given the nature of his other guest, but the terms of his pact with Sam were clear. The worry had to be set aside. There was a wake to be held, and the wake was just him. The clock behind the bar read 19:55. Assuming it still read bar time rather than real time, he had 10 minutes before his guest arrived at 20:00.

Zachariah got back to the table, sat down and set his Guinness and the Best next to Sam's other two as yet undrunk pints. Good, he had time to finish. He took the last envelope off the stack. It had Taj Mahal written on it in black ink. He put a spoonful of Sam's ashes in the envelope and sealed it shut. Sam's list had gotten long over the years, longer than Zachariah remembered it ever being, but there'd been enough ashes for all the places. Zachariah was going to have a busy few months. Some of the places would be interesting: Angkor Watt was in the heart of the war zone, and the Army of the Black Star were known for not taking prisoners; a unknown plague was burning wild through the Yucatan; and then there was Mauna Loa, which had become much more active recently. Fortunately, Zachariah had been the resourceful one of the pair, and he felt confident that he'd be able to make his way to most of the places without undue difficulty. Besides, it would give him something to do in his retirement. The only destination that was going to be particularly troublesome was the first one on the list, and the most important one: Mars. To get to Mars required getting around the Quarantine, and that would take some work. That was the reason behind his meeting tonight.

Zachariah remembered the beginnings of the Quarantine, long before it was called that. He and Sam had still been kids when the Mars probes had started going wrong. For every failure, there was an explanation or a plausible cause, though engineers in the US and Europe forgetting to coordinate the units they were working with, that one was just a bit too much to believe. Pioneer stopped broadcasting a few years after that, but it had already lasted far longer than anyone had

expected. Then the Voyagers had fallen silent, again no surprise. But then, the pace picked up. Shuttle accidents became a regular occurrence, satellite launch vehicles blew up on the pad, and slowly, over a couple of decades, every outward looking satellite in Earth orbit, and every probe sent out into space beyond, had failed. As with the Mars probes, for each failure, there was an explanation that seemed plausible on the surface, but not everyone was willing to buy the degree of coincidence implied.

The question hung in the air: were they all accidents, or was there someone, or something, behind it? Most people didn't care at all, as long as their phones worked, and their satellite TV, and their fancy new automobile GPS navigation systems. Zachariah was among those who didn't believe in coincidence. By this time, Sam had gone off to become a teacher, and he and Zachariah were only in sporadic, occasional contact. It was Sam, though, who'd sent Zachariah the article, from some fringe amateur UFO-conspiracy theory laden science fiction magazine, calling it the Quarantine for the first time. He'd written *Guess I'm not getting to Mars* anytime soon across the top. That was the last time he'd heard from Sam. Over time, people began to forget about space. There were enough problems on Earth to keep everyone occupied and distracted, and the feeling began to grow, as though carefully cultivated and nurtured, there wasn't going to be anything worth seeing on the Moon that we hadn't already seen, and nothing interesting on Mars to find. Besides, why spend precious resources visiting a dead piece of rock when there was poverty on earth still to deal with.

It was almost time. Zachariah raised a silent toast to Sam and finished his Guinness, and went up to the bar to get another round, the last of the evening. On his way to the bar, he looked around. In the hours he'd been here, he hadn't been able to find anything that had changed significantly from the last time he'd been here. Everything was a bit older, of course, but then it'd been sixteen years since he'd been here, since the wake after Mom's funeral. The colors of things had been washed out by time, and the curtains were a bit more frayed than he'd remembered. But there were the same dull pewter tankards hanging from the exposed beams in the ceiling and the same scythes and pitchforks hanging on the walls. The air was murky from the combusted ghosts of cigarettes and cheap cigars smoked here over the decades, and the spores from the mold feeding on the spilled beer that never quite dried out of the carpet.

And Easter was still pulling pints behind the bar, still with the same poor taste in loud flannel shirts. He never forgot a customer, and he'd started to pour the pint of Guinness as soon as Zachariah had walked through the door. Unsurprisingly, he hadn't recognized Sam, and Zachariah'd had to ask for the first pint of Best. Waiting while Easter waited for his Guinness to settle, Zachariah ran his hand along the bar. Dad had told the story that it had been carved from a single piece of wood, from an old tree that had come down during the big storm of 1988. A lot of dad's stories seemed to come from that night, when the wind howled like a wild tortured beast, tore the roofs off the houses, broke the trees, and drove the waves onto the shore. The bar had suffered over the years, from spilled drinks, cigarette burns, and the occasional impatient and incompetent whittling while someone was waiting for a drink and Easter wasn't looking. Standing here at the bar reminded him of Sam, since they spent a lot of time standing at this bar, waiting for their dads' pints to settle. Thinking of him reminded Zachariah of their pact, and of the night that he and Sam had started worrying the details, on the walk over. Sam kept tripping, as he did every clear night, unable to keep his eyes on the road.

Sam had grown up wanting to travel, to be somewhere else. Anywhere else. The stars had captivated him, as had television, movies, in fact any picture or story of somewhere exotic that drifted across his line of vision. He was only ten when he'd started drafting his list. The first place on the list was Mars; he'd spent entire summer afternoons in the library, skipping out on football games in the sun to pore over maps of the canalli, trying to decide just where he'd go, planning his itinerary for a trip to a land that had disappeared decades before. He'd kept the list in his wallet, on a piece of paper that had been folded too many times. He'd take it out occasionally, adding a place, removing a place, taping it back together when it threatened to come apart, recopying it when it did, but Mars had never moved from the top of the list. Zachariah shook his head and smiled at the memory of Sam and the fire in his eyes whenever he'd talked about Mars or about improbable trips to far distant stars.

Hence the pact. "When I die," Zachariah remembered Sam saying that night, "if I haven't made it to Mars, make sure I get there." Zachariah had agreed, at first just to shut Sam up on the topic; he hadn't talked about anything else for weeks at that point. Hell, they'd only been fifteen years old, and Zachariah hadn't made the promise with any intention of keeping it. That had been his way

then, as it had continued to be. But Sam had been persistent, and he'd worn Zachariah down. It took another three years before Zachariah had opened up and tasked Sam with his half of the pact. Sam had left the next day for university. He'd made his escape. It took Zachariah another eighteen months to get out, into the army. Zachariah had been recruited by the Agency while still in the army.

The thunk of a full pint being set none too gently on the bar brought Zachariah back to the present. He paid Easter and took the pints back to the table. He set Sam's pint next to the others and sat down. The urn holding Sam's ashes was plain but heavy, a white stone cylinder about six inches high and four in diameter. Sam had no family left, like Zachariah, and no other friends that anyone knew of. It was his lawyer who'd eventually tracked Zachariah down. Sam hadn't left any money, but he'd never had much, and he'd spent whatever he earned traveling to yet somewhere else he hadn't been. All there was, Sam's entire estate, besides the slowly rotting ancestral home with its books and furniture, were the ashes and the list. And the pact.

The clock behind the bar read 20:05, and Zachariah looked up to see the stranger, his guest, walk into the pub, dripping wet from the storm outside. Without looking around, he walked up to the bar and spoke to Easter. Easter pulled him a pint, lager by the looks of it, and then pointed over to the table where Zachariah was sitting. Like Zachariah, the stranger was average height, average build, bald but otherwise nondescript. No glasses. No facial hair; in fact, in the dim light of the pub, his skin looked remarkably smooth. No scars. No tattoos. No physical characteristic to capture attention. Zachariah watched closely as he walked over to the table. He had a slight limp as he walked, but only just enough to break his symmetry, not enough to draw attention to himself. The only unusual thing was the absolute stillness with which he held his pint. No sloshing, no spilling. The lager in the glass was absolutely level. Zachariah smiled to himself, careful not to let any of it leak onto his face: it was the accumulation of that sort of detail that had given them away in the end.

"My name is Bob. Are you Zachariah?" the stranger asked, standing next to his table. Zachariah nodded, said "Yes, I am," and motioned towards the empty seat across the table.

The stranger nodded. Zachariah reached over the table and shook Bob's hand. "Pleased to meet you, Bob." As with everything else about his, his grip was generic. Not too firm, not clammy or flabby. Unremarkable, and all the more remarkable for that. "I'm glad you

were able to make it." He'd spent months trying to figure out a way to get one of the aliens to come and meet with him, without giving too much away. In the end, Zachariah had decided to be direct. He read through the files, the characterizations of the aliens the Agency had put together over the years, chose one, and sent him a message, a message that evidently had been sufficient.

Bob sat down and set his pint on the table. Though Zachariah had, over the decades, spent weeks at a time watching the aliens, getting to know the individuals, speculating on their social structure, et cetera, he'd never been this close to one of them with it being aware of his presence. He could hear the voice of his training, yelling at him, pushing at him, trying to drag him to his feet and out of there, to move before it was too late, and it took more will than he'd expected to ignore the voice. But there was the pact to honor. There was this one first promise that he had to keep.

Zachariah closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and began to speak. "It will take me a few minutes to get to the point of this meeting, as I have to tell you a story first. Are you willing to listen?" He opened his eyes to see Bob nod his assent, and he continued. "Growing up, Sam was my best friend. In fact, Sam was my only friend. Sam and I used to come to this pub when we were younger, with our dads and then later on our own. That's why we're meeting here. We would sit at this table, and drink our pints, and talk about the dreams we had. That's why we're here today, to honor his memory. So, before going any further, we raise a toast to the memory of Samuel David Sampson." Zachariah raised his glass, and Bob followed, and they drank.

Zachariah motioned to the urn, and opened his mouth to continue, but instead he paused. He wouldn't cry, that he knew. He'd learned too well over the years to bottle up his emotions, to hide them away and not let them show. It was all part of being a good soldier. But he could still feel the emotions roiling around inside, and he savored them for a moment. He hadn't felt anything for years, and as much as it hurt, it was good to feel a bit again. "This is all that remains of Sam. He died several weeks ago, and was cremated, burned to ash, as is our custom. It is the duty of the family of the deceased to dispose of the ashes according to the wishes of the deceased. As Sam has no family, that duty falls to me."

He paused and looked over at Bob. Another small detail that the aliens had never quite made to work was to cultivate a lack of regularity. Their eye blinks were always exactly three seconds apart. Watching

Bob, Zachariah began to feel slightly uneasy.

"When Sam and I were young, we made a pact. We each had a dream, something we wanted to accomplish in our lives, that the one left alive agreed to realize when the other died. Sam died first, and so it falls to me to honor that promise. Do you understand?"

After a score of the heartbeats that Zachariah could hear pounding in his ears, even over the noise of the pub, Bob nodded. Zachariah let loose the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He'd begun to fear whether he'd pushed too hard, too fast. After all, the aliens had been on earth for years, decades, maybe centuries, and had maintained their cover well enough to never be caught out in the open. It had taken courage on Bob's part to come here and face the one threatening to expose their existence to the wider public. But Zachariah was also aware that time was short and that his betrayal would be discovered soon, and so he pressed on.

"Sam's dream was to go to Mars. Even without your Quarantine, it would have been difficult, as we were not on track to become a space-faring people. But it became impossible for him after you established the Quarantine. That is the promise that I agreed to keep, to get Sam to Mars."

Now came the moment of truth. Zachariah glanced up to the ceiling, looked back down into Bob's eyes, and gave the speech he'd been working on for the last two weeks, ever since this idea had occurred to him. "As you know from the message I sent to you, we know about you. Something that you may or may not know, is that we know who many of you are. There's a lot we know, and a lot we don't know. We've been watching you for years. We know where each of you live, but we don't know where you came from originally, or even when you arrived. We know how you communicate with each other, but we don't know what you say to each other, whether it's some sort of code or just your native language. We know where each of you work, and we know how you set up and have maintained the Quarantine from inside. We don't know why you've shut off the road to space, but I for one will admit that you've done it extremely carefully and effectively. We've been patient for a long time, content just to observe you and try to piece together an accurate picture of your capabilities, but that patience may end soon. Many years ago, I made a promise to a friend. Over the years since, I've made a lot of promises to a lot of other people, but haven't kept any of them. My time has almost come, and I need to keep that one first big promise. I'm not sure I could tell you why, exactly, and I'm

not sure that you would understand. Maybe I need to do it as a first step towards redemption, but the reasons aren't important. I promised Sam that, were he to die before me, I would make sure that he got to Mars."

Zachariah looked at Bob. Bob was staring back at him, not moving, not saying anything. He offered no denial, but made no acknowledgement either. Zachariah took the envelope from the bottom of the stack of addressed envelopes. The word Mars was written on it in large block letters. From his jacket pocket, he took out a hard plastic disc case.

"On this disc is a copy of everything we know about you. Biographies of all the aliens we know of, and how we spotted each one. Analyses and guesses about your capabilities. Relevant observations from our satellites, made before you destroyed them. Everything. I offer this to you as payment for doing something that I can't do. I ask you to take these ashes to Mars, and scatter them in its thin wind. The sincerity of my offer is contained in the information I am passing along to you. I realize that I brought you here with a threat, and I apologize for that, but I didn't have time to come up with a better way of getting you here so quickly."

Bob stared into Zachariah's eyes for a few moments before reaching across the table, taking the envelope and the disc and pocketing them. He picked up his pint and said to Zachariah, "Let us drink to the memory of Samuel David Sampson."

After the toast, Bob got up and left the pub, leaving most of his pint behind, and Zachariah sat for a moment before drinking down the rest of his Guinness. He didn't have long before they all came after him, both his side, for his betrayal, and the other, if they thought he knew more than he'd told them. For all he knew, they could both be waiting for him outside the pub, but it was too late to worry about that now. He had his escape route set, but first he had to finish this. He had a spoonful of Sam left, and he knew what he had to do with it. After all, Sam had loved this place, and Easter wouldn't mind. Zachariah sprinkled the last spoonful on the floor, and picking up the stack of envelopes, walked out into the dark and stormy night. •

With the word “issues” included in the ad, Lauren had expected something to be a little off about the whole thing.

The Coming Years of Good

Robert Burke Richardson

The ad sounded perfect: *Walk to the train station. Outdoor swimming-pool on site. Furnished/ issues.*

Lauren called on her lunch break and signed the lease by fax when she was able to talk the landlord down to \$300 a month. The furnishing, she discovered later, was tasteful and even a bit on the expensive side: pine floors, mahogany table, and a red/blue/orange loveseat that actually looked cool in spite of being plaid. With the word “issues” included in the ad, Lauren had expected something to be a little off about the whole thing; as it turned out, the “issues” were a tiny but perfectly proportioned couple who lived in the wall behind the bedroom.

The issues had no names, so far as Lauren knew. Their deranged home movies, which they shared with her the very first night (making tiny bowls of cinnamon-sprinkled popcorn and breaking out their pint-sized VCR) billed them as Fred Asstear and Ginger Rogered, but Lauren wasn’t about to refer to them by either of those names. The man had bright black eyes and a trim moustache and looked to Lauren like a Ned, but she took to thinking of him as Weather-Man after the argument she overheard through the wall her first night.

Mrs. Issue was onion-faced and a bit on the plump side, with a tremendous grace that followed her like a thundercloud as she knit tiny pink sweaters or sipped tea from a cat-bone china tea set. That

night, the woman's little voice was so distended by rage that Lauren found it almost unrecognizable. "You blew it right out of my hands!" she screamed through the wall.

Despite the late hour, and the fact that Lauren had set her alarm for 5:30 AM, she found the tiny woman's accusations utterly fascinating. "And don't think I didn't see you fooling around with that young girl's skirts! You oughta be ashamed, a grown man like you and her only in her teens!"

Bug-Girl (as Lauren would come to call the tiny lady) seemed to think her husband could control the weather. She said he used his gifts primarily to annoy her, and to lift the skirts of pretty girls. He wielded power subtly, she said, extending a pinky or merely staring hard until the wind rose and roiled and did his prankster bidding. Earlier that day, Weather-Man had blown the cookies-and-cream scoop of Bug-Girl's miniature two-scoop cone straight into the outdoor swimming pool, which the issues called "the uncrossable ocean."

Lauren heard Weather-Man shriek in desperate terror, but the screaming soon died away, replaced by whoops and moans as the couple started filming another movie. Lauren slept fitfully, dreaming of malevolent crows, and woke once to find Weather-Man staring at her from a dark corner, stroking his teeny-tiny member. She blinked and rubbed her eyes and he was gone when she looked again.

The tiny couple were eating pancakes and sparrow-egg omelets when Lauren awoke, but she scrutinized every crack and potential spy-hole in the bathroom before stepping into the shower, just in case they finished breakfast early and got it into their heads to spy. The spray, harder than the shower at her parents', left tingling pink lines along Lauren's abdomen and thighs. She nudged the shower a quarter inch to the cooler side and was doused by a massive flow of freezing cold. Gasping, stopping herself from screaming, she carefully turned the dial back toward hot. Lauren located a thin temperate zone just on the hot side of center and lingered longer than she'd intended, getting to work with wet hair and steam-blushed skin.

She got home that evening to find storm clouds gathering above the apartment building. Weather-Man sliced pieces from a loaf of bread that screamed and begged for mercy. Bug-Girl flew in the window on the back of an electric-blue dragonfly, then cast furtive glances at her husband while she set to mending a sock. The issues looked to be in a cooling-off period after some big fight, and Lauren thought she knew a way to speed their reconciliation.

"Ta da!" she said, placing a chocolate cupcake with one flickering candle on the table beside the little man. His eyes widened and he scurried to the edge of the table, crying, "Put it out, put it out!" until Bug-Girl jumped down from the bookshelf to comfort him.

"I'm sorry," Lauren said, blowing out the candle. "I thought it would be a nice surprise."

"It was very thoughtful, dear," said Bug-Girl, who had not been as close to the flame. Weather-Man relaxed in his wife's arms. "We're filled with Devonshire cream," she explained, "and heat like that can spoil us."

"Technically," said Weather-Man, "we should be living in the fridge." His fear doused along with the flame, he walked over and sampled the cupcake. "Yummy!"

Lauren went over to the loveseat. A little excitement was okay for the first night, but she was hoping for a quiet evening tonight. The chocolate put the issues in an amorous mood, and they retired to their wall to make more movies. The furnished apartment came with books on the bookshelves: mostly tattered romances and paperback thrillers. She settled into a novel about a country girl named Hilda who, like Lauren, didn't like touching herself, which led to feelings of frustration.

When Lauren was a hundred pages into the book, a black widow spider crawled up her bare arm. Swatting and jumping, she stood on the couch and watched the creepy thing disappear into the floorboards. It hadn't bitten her, but her whole body felt tingly and alive.

Bug-Girl came stomping out of the bedroom, Weather-Man pleading at her heels. Lauren cried a warning for them to run away, but they came closer instead, seeking mediation. Sighing, Lauren came down from the couch.

"He makes me lactose intolerant!"

"She gives roses their thorns!"

"His urine ruins farmland in Albania!"

"She makes the gravitational constant too high!"

"It's his fault mythology isn't true!"

"She has no nostrils!"

"His genitals—"

"I'm quite sure none of that is true," Lauren said calmly, keeping an eye out for the spider. "Now what is this really all about?"

They looked at each other, trying to determine who should make the disclosure. Finally, with a defeated shrug, Bug-Girl said, "He makes me angry."

Finally we're getting to the heart of the matter, thought Lauren. Maybe now we—

Weather-Man jumped up and, with a flourish of his arms, said, "And *she* turns her black thoughts into creepy-crawlies!"

Lauren scoffed, but Bug-Girl only looked guiltier, and Weather-Man did not alter the hard set of his mouth. Apparently, they were serious about this accusation.

"Show her," said Weather-Man.

"I can't just do it on command!"

"You know how they used to think that flies appeared magically from dead bodies?" Weather-Man asked Lauren. "Well, they were right. All this mumbo-jumbo about flies planting maggots in everything in existence is preposterous. Insects are created from negative emotions. The average person has millions of tiny, inconsequentially evil thoughts every day—maybe I'll push you off the subway platform, maybe I'll stab you with scissors. These become your flies and ants and what-have-you. But evil thoughts that stagnate, that stick around in your subconscious for days and weeks and years—sick, venomous thoughts that take on a life of their own—those become your scorpions and black widow spiders." He spun about and pointed an accusing finger at Bug-Girl, who Lauren saw was near tears. "And she is chock full o' those!"

"Because of you!" yelled Bug-Girl, and a pale green worm pushed itself up through the floorboards.

"You both need to stop this now," Lauren said. Weather-Man's pinky twitched and a breeze blew through the big bay windows from the courtyard, sweeping the worm away. "You two are toxic to each other," Lauren said. "I'm sorry, but I don't know what else to tell you."

Both the tiny people looked thoroughly chastised. "I'm tired," said Lauren. "Let's talk about this tomorrow, huh?" Despite herself, her words were edgy when she added, "After a good night's sleep." Judging from their forlorn expressions, the issues seemed to understand her unstated message that there was to be no filming of movies that night.

As soon as her head hit the pillow, Lauren fell into a dreamless sleep. She awoke later with something wriggling inside her underwear. Throwing back the covers and leaping from the bed, she struggled out of her panties and listened to the click-clack of spider feet scurry into the shadows. Something wet and slimy—millipedes, she was sure—fell on her head and slithered through her hair. She felt ants crawling over her toes and up her arms and a huge, buzzing housefly banged

insistently against her left temple. She leaped back into bed, grabbed the headboard, and puked termite larvae onto the hardwood floor.

A cold breeze. Lauren stood in the living room, in front of the open bay windows. Looking down, she saw that not a stitch of clothing covered her moonlit body. She hadn't sleepwalked since she was nine years old—could that be how she got here? She wondered if she should try to close the curtains. The courtyard was still, all the other windows dark, and she didn't want to do anything that might attract attention to her. With as little movement as possible she stepped backwards, turned, and went into her room.

The floor was free of bugs. Lauren imagined her roommates' tiny eyes watching through the cracks, but she didn't care. She went to the kitchen, then got into bed without dressing, and curled up with a can of Raid.

The next day Lauren had lunch with Betsy and explained the situation. Betsy fussed with her ruler-straight bangs, squeezed lemon over her stick of fish, and adjusted her glasses. Lauren still hadn't ordered, but was leaning toward a grilled-cheese sandwich and a cup of oolong.

"Why don't you just move?" Betsy said. "Or make them move?"

Lauren sighed. "I'll never find another place I can afford. Besides, they have this sweet sort of homespun magic. And they're so filled with vitality. As horrible as they can be, I don't really want to let go of that."

Betsy bit into the fish, chewed, swallowed. "Hurry up and order," she said. "Dale wants us back by one sharp."

"That Dale better learn to relax," said Lauren, "or my thoughts'll start turning into bugs!"

"Maybe the little people are trying to help you with something," Betsy said. "Maybe there's a plan behind all the craziness."

Betsy's idea put Lauren in an uneasy mood, and the conversation soon dried up.

The issues were dancing on the kitchen table when Lauren got home. The sun shone brightly through the window, illuminating a bug-free apartment. "We're sorry we're such a bother," Bug-Girl said, tilting her head back as Weather-Man dipped her. She stared up at Lauren with happy, glittering eyes. "I'll tell you the secret to creating and maintaining passion, if you like."

Intrigued, Lauren leaned down to hear better. "Good is a narrow-

ly defined term," Weather-Man piped-up. "It's defined by committee and slow to change. Evil is a key component of good." He spun his wife and she giggled merrily. "Evil keeps good vital and alive."

"You need to dance," Bug-Girl said. "Always dance, and then dance some more."

"On the head of a pin, whenever possible," Weather-Man added.

Lauren headed for the couch and her half-finished book, but the plot became disjointed and hard to follow: *Hilda had become the property of a tiny man no bigger than Weather-Man, and went to live in his mountain cottage. On the third night, the little man visited Hilda in bed, crawled up between her legs, and brought her the kind of pleasures for which words don't exist. The little man stayed in the girl for a week, feeding her shivers of pleasure whenever she did as she was told. Hilda's eyes became just like his, and the villagers who came to trade swore they could see the little man peering out from behind her pupils. After that, Hilda started going to the village naked and performing lewd acts in public.*

Lauren closed the book. Her arms felt tingly again, and a strange melody flitted in and out of her brain. She went back to the table where the miniature couple danced. They were so in love that they didn't notice Lauren's giant hand until it was too late.

She brought her fist down on Weather-Man, squirting his creamy guts over the table, and trapping Bug-Girl under a corner of the wooden cutting-board. Using the side of her hand, Lauren scooped up Weather-Man's remains and sucked them down.

"But why?" Bug-Girl asked as Lauren squeezed her. "Why are you doing this to us?"

"Just one act of evil," said Lauren. "To frame the coming years of good." *The quiet nights*, she thought. The peaceful apartment. She bit Bug-Girl's head off and sucked out her Devonshire innards, so creamy and rich her throat nearly closed itself up.

Wind loosened Lauren's hair, and the ends danced with static as lightning flashed. *Now to find my enemies*, she thought as she stormed down the sidewalk. •

I Know What I Know

Diane Tucker

Will he carve us into his palms tonight? We need
a path deep enough for tears, that ancient river,
one strong enough to cut cities in us. Canyons.

The shadows are longer than I remember,
the chill sooner. Is the sun running faster?
What is he trying to get away from? His own corona?

Why should we ask all our questions at once?
Those answers will wait. They wait somewhere
under my tongue, dissolving. Search for them.

Why bother closing or hiding anything?
You know about the sun, how its heat bathes
the evil and the good. Inescapable baking.

The moon, where no water flows, is covered with Seas
of Rains, Clouds, Moisture, each a plain of white dust.
The empty seas Tranquility, Serenity, Knowledge. And Crises.

Tonight we feel everything that cuts us off
from the sky, from the chill bright parade of stars.
Tonight we are only what we cannot reach. Hands empty.

Even the birds are stuck down here, pecking
for what they can find in the streets, pretending
that stones from our shoes are seeds. That we might grow.

I know, damn it, I know what I know, and it's
not doing us any good anymore. Stop telling me.
When will we be more than we know? Like the birds.

The poor dry moon got up there somehow.
Somewhere there must be words that will serve
as stairs, as swords to cut the city free. As wings. •

He Is Almost There

Rocco de Giacomo

He can feel it:
the sun catching in the hair
of the old woman,
the movements of two girls
slowing to amber.

He must remain careful, though:
this is still a bubble,
a balance between substance
and indulgence,
filling with his own breath.

One wrong move,
and this could prick against a topic
he wants to avoid,
or brush against the radio static
he's trying to ignore.

It's no laughing matter:
despite the sunlight
sifting through canopy of leaves,
and the white ducks
drifting like a tender pause,
things here

are hanging by a thread.

And for those white ducks
to keep doing what they are doing,
and for those little kid fingers
dripping with ice cream,
the garden
must be maintained:
the street artists
the panhandlers,
the scrape of tires,
the jagged lean of bike couriers
must be kept away
for now,
until this poem
can breath a little
on its own. •

Ah, how innocent my schooldays
now seem as I wade through the
paperwork that genocides generate.

Unravelling Biology

Robert Lake

Fifty years ago today Constable Sergeant Nelson Eddy Preston of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police gunned down my boyhood friend, Willie. A dunce kills a genius and is suspended without pay for only three weeks until a jury of his peers, who by definition must be dunces themselves, acquits him. Sometimes Justice is a blind crapshoot, I tell my law clerks.

I'd better start with Willie attempting to become Roy Rogers, that yodelling cowboy star. Everybody had assumed Willie would study physics on an MIT scholarship because he was a ten-year-old genius and star of Miss Quasimodo's enriched class. I too sat among those elite because my far-reaching peripheral vision permitted me to inspect the answers of classmates before copying selected excerpts into my exam booklet. It was in that idyllic rural classroom that I first learned to weigh all viewpoints before passing judgement, a habit I practice daily as Chief Justice of the War Crimes Tribunal here at Der Hague.

Ah, how innocent my school days now seem as I wade through the paperwork that genocides generate. One time Miss Quasimodo was reading poetry at us—local gossip claimed she'd been parachuted into France during World War II to serve as a radio operator where she fell in love with a French resistance fighter; he died, the victim of a Vichy clerical error when one of Miss Quasimodo's spurned suitors dumped

her lover's file in the gypsy bin, perhaps erroneously, perhaps maliciously; a distraught Miss Quasimodo returned to Loon County to devote herself to our education. How we loathed the Gestapo for not detaining her.

*For we are all like swimmers in the sea
Poised atop a huge wave of fate
Which hangs uncertain which side to fall
And whether it will heave us up to shore
Or roll us out to sea, we know not
And no search will make us know
Only that event will teach us in its hour*

"That's rubbish," said Willie.

If I'd said that Miss Quasimodo would have had my boyish balls for bookends. But Willie was a genius, certified by the Stanford-Binet.

"Why, Willie?" asked Miss Quasimodo obsequiously.

"A hanging wave rests for a determinable length of time at a point of temporary equilibrium. Call this x. Call the point of equilibrium y, also the product of calculable forces. Please recite the poet's data on wind speed, direction, net current dispositions and so forth. I'll graph the very predictable fall of this allegedly indecisive wave."

Miss Quasimodo confessed that Matthew Arnold hadn't published his data, raw or cooked. "What can you expect from a poet?" asked Willie.

A few days later he came over to my tree house and, while I scrutinized Playboy, he skimmed a huge book, frequently interrupting to keep me posted on breakthroughs in the history of physics. "They've just discovered the mass defect. Four atoms of protium should make a single atom of helium with an atomic mass of 4.13128 u. But get this, Cain. The mass of a helium atom is only 4.0026 u. Wow, is this ever exciting! Mass has been lost! E equals MC squared, therefore, vast amounts of energy have been created. Wow, what stunning equations!"

I was mentally fondling the very stunning Miss November when I noticed spittle spewing from Willie's mouth. He'd read further on. Physicists had exploited their mass defect to invent the atom bomb. The Americans dumped a couple on Japan. Willie just couldn't accept that his heroes' beautiful equations were recipes for incinerating yellow people, although in more tolerant times scientists developed smarter bombs to incinerate people regardless of race, colour, creed or sexual

orientation.

Most people recover from exposure to massacres quickly, but not Willie. He was drugged to control his convulsions and was still shaky when his father, Hector, took us to see a movie to celebrate his return from Ferdinand Destouches Memorial Hospital. Hector never spoke to anybody, not a single word, not because he was unfriendly, but because he found people's jabbering unfathomable. One afternoon at a strawberry social he passed a note to Willie's mother, Rose, saying he would not utter another word until he figured out why people constantly babbled. Hector figured single-minded concentration would solve this conundrum in a week or two. Alas, he went silently to his dumb grave, perhaps fortunately because he was the only person I ever told how my reading error may have contributed to Willie's demise.

I digress. Rancid popcorn clung to the Roxy's filthy floors and the Roy Rogers movie was lame. This old whiskered guy, Gabby Hayes, ran a ranch for homeless boys. Some desperados came looking for one of the manly little buckaroos because they suspected he was hiding some loot. Gabby went running for Roy Rogers and the warbling Sons of the Pioneers and, you guessed it, the bad guys ended up in the old calaboose. Willie took off for the can. I chased him.

"Cain, everywhere there's always killing," said Willie.

"Hell, Willie, people don't get killed in movies. You know that."

"Cain, Roy Rogers' blazing six guns are dropping desperados like flies."

"Willie, in movies nobody's dead even when they're killed."

"You can't survive after losing all that blood."

Willie's ignorance astonished me. Apparently, genius is a luxuriant oasis surrounded by vast deserts of idiocy. At first he didn't believe that actors tucked little packets of ketchup under their shirts and popped them when they got shot. The studios aren't into real killing, I said, because it would hurt record sales. Willie joyously hugged me, insisted we return to listen to Roy's melodious yodelling and that night decided to become Roy Rogers. I said he couldn't because Roy Rogers wasn't his name, but he said Roy Rogers' real name wasn't Roy Rogers' either. Apparently, Roy was Leonard Slye, who hadn't learned to yodel overnight either. Willie's yodelling was all over the range. Physics was his second nature; being Roy Rogers wasn't even his tenth nature, although Willie used his massive brainpower to bend his recalcitrant nature to his formidable will.

Nevertheless, Willie's Roy Rogers remained stilted. He downed

sarsaparilla with an elaborate gusto that proved he loathed it. The stern perfection of his tooled leather belt, the impeccable stitching on his embroidered shirt, the white whiter-than-white of his Stetson, the glittering gleam of his silver spurs, all betrayed an inner deficiency. He rode flawlessly, but jumped joylessly onto his horse to gallop off with his cap guns blazing, his face grim as he dodged imaginary bullets. Willie's squeaky voice never twanged convincingly, although he persisted, refusing to submit homework to Miss Quasimodo because it interfered with his elocution lessons in drawling. Finally, with bitter tears but intact integrity, she demoted Willie to the regular class and then, oh, how her tears flowed, to the class for slow learners. I too suffered. Without Willie's elegant equations to replicate, my grades plunged. But with characteristic fortitude I jettisoned my plans for Harvard Law and forged ahead with letters of recommendation to Baffin Island Community College.

Willie taught an old flabby Percheron to behave like Trigger, Roy's Palomino. Babe learned to drink milk from a bottle, walk 150 feet on his hind legs, do simple addition and subtraction, count to twenty, and stoically accept a toupee to replace his tail after fans plucked his rear end clean. Not surprisingly, Willie's way with horses thrilled the emerging hormones of Priscilla Palmerston, the daughter of Silas Palmerston, who farmed a bog on the sixth concession. She renounced her ambition to become an Avon Lady and dumped Sergeant Nelson Eddy Preston, her childhood sweetheart. (We always called him Snek even before he flunked shop; what kind of parents christen a defenceless, albeit ugly, baby, Sergeant Nelson Eddy Preston?) Priscilla claimed she was Dale Evans, Roy's sweetheart on the TV show. She started hitching her horse, called Buttermilk, of course, to parking meters and spinning lariats and claiming folks were sights for sore eyes. She galloped alongside Willie, chased little doggies and loaded chuck wagons for the drive to Dodge City, all in vain because Willie hadn't renounced physics merely to get into Priscilla's chaps. She soon slunk back to Snek, who no longer loved her, considering her a weird guy's reject.

Silas didn't take Willie's indifference to his pride and joy kindly either, although I doubt that influenced his testimony at Snek's trial. I firmly believe principle persuaded Silas to perjure himself and I'm a good judge of character. The Chief Justice of a War Crimes Tribunal has to be. I can't rely only on the principle that the defeated lot are the real war criminals; sometimes, they regain power and former partners in peace become war criminals because they've displeased the Americans

and/or Europeans.

Naturally, I studied Willie. A boy who didn't want to get into Priscilla's chaps was obviously an addled egghead. My suspicions were verified when I blundered upon Willie's letter to MIT, while I was searching his room. He was about sixteen by then and had discovered the elegant intricacies of biology. His letter to MIT, accepting a scholarship about ten times larger than the loan I hoped for from Baffin Island, predicted biology would easily surpass physics as the discipline of mass destruction in the 21st century. He would gladly unravel its elegant intricacies. This sounded scary. If biology could surpass physics' prowess at mass destruction, what would biology prove capable of with its elegant intricacies unravelled by a genius like Willie? Something not altogether pleasant, I deduced.

Motivated by the idealism, I shared the contents of the letter with Snep, by then a Constable in the RCMP, empowered to carry government-issue firearms. I cautioned Snep not to fire to kill. Capital punishment can be fatal and he could save the world from unravelled biology by simply disabling a tiny portion of Willie's massive brain. "Did you use the absolute minimum force necessary?" I always ask indicted war criminals.

The last gunfight of a genius should inspire awe, but death is flagrantly disorderly. Willie hitched Babe to a water hydrant in Benedict Arnold Square, said howdy to Snep, who was stroking his wonder dog, King, and ostentatiously reading a Gene Autry comic book. Because of its technical complexity, I have omitted the spirited debate between Willie and Snep regarding the relative merits of Trigger and Champion, Gene's horse. It will be published in fifty years after my state funeral when the National Archives releases my papers.

"By the authority vested in me by the Minister of Justice of Canada, who is in the pay of the President of the United States, I order you to hand over your cap guns," Snep snapped.

"Nobody takes Roy Rogers' cap guns," replied Willie.

"Yeah?" Snep sneered. "

"Yeah, yourself," Willie yodelled back.

They dared each other, double dared each other, drew lines in the sandbox in Benedict Arnold Square's playground, and double dared each other again. It became so tedious I again perused Willie's letter accepting a scholarship to MIT. *Hold on*, I thought. Willie intended to unravel the elegant intricacies of biology. Maybe he intended to unravel them to neutralize the germs, microbes and other creepy things

warmongers/statesmen might employ against each other's citizens. Maybe Willie meant to unravel biology in the interests of peace. Perhaps disabling his brain was counter productive.

"Stop," I yelled.

"Draw," Willie challenged Snep. In a split second, .32146 to be precise, (always be precise, I caution my law clerks) Snep stared into the muzzles of Willie's cap guns, panic galloping across his crossed eyes. He yanked at his holster's cover, cursing Mountie regulations that insisted a gun always be worn in a closed holster. Finally, he drew his gun and fired. Nothing happened.

"Stop!" I cried. "A nasty mishap may be prevented if we clarify the contents of the letter I hold in my hand."

"Damn that safety catch," Snep cursed.

"Mounties always were slow on the draw," Willie yodelled dismissively, his caps smoking. CRACK! Snep's shot hit Willie in the chest.

"This here ain't ketchup. This is my life's blood," Willie said. *Plop, plop, plop*, so slowly Willie's blood plopped, a trickle, but sufficient to leech life from even a genius' arteries. King's cold snout licked the disbelieving, frightened face of Willie.

"Willie," I cried. "Please clarify why you wanted to unravel biology." He just smiled and replied, "Good bye, good luck and may the Good Lord take a liking to you."

I positioned his saddle under his head; you cannot copy the equations of a genius without coming to love the back roads of his mind. An angry mob clamoured to lynch Snep. He threatened to shoot them, a challenge eagerly accepted by Silas Palmerston. "Snep, you'll only be able to drop five of us. You've already used one slug to drop a genius."

"Hold on, I need time to ponder," Snep said.

"What fer, varmint?" Silas demanded to know.

"I need time to reckon out who most deserves having their guts splashed out onto Benedict Arnold Square," replied Snep. Everyone agreed this was reasonable, but when Snep told me I was number one and to stand aside while he picked the other four, I protested such blatant injustice. Everybody else lined up and waited for Snep to choose, a difficult task because so many in the line deserved being put down. To pass the time Silas asked Snep why he had gunned down Willie anyhow. Snep replied that he had confidential information indicating Willie wanted to unravel the elegant intricacies of biology at MIT. The crowd murmured in agreement when Silas said maybe they

shouldn't lynch Snep, seeing as how biological warfare might do to them what DDT had done to local songbirds. Silas suggested he and other Loon County luminaries testify that Snep fired in self-defence. Since the jury would be chosen from those in the line-up, a verdict of not guilty was inevitable and had the additional advantage that Snep wouldn't need to gun down four decent men and that snivelling sucker, Cain.

I took exception to being described as a snivelling sucker and decided to protest that Willie's letter could easily be interpreted to mean he wanted to unravel biology to counter biological warfare. Therefore, Willie had been gunned down unjustly. Alas, there was an impediment, namely Snep's government-issue gun. If I convinced Silas and the others that Snep was a murderer, they'd lynch Snep after he had gunned down four of them and worse, gunned down me. Obviously, I had no choice but to refrain from engaging in textual interpretation.

Well, that was a learning experience, which is why I constantly remind my law clerks to read the documentation of crimes against humanity carefully. Check and double check, I say. If I hadn't jumped to an erroneous conclusion about why Willie wanted to unravel biology, he might be alive today, probably the winner of the Nobel Prize. Biological warfare might not be the preferred way of settling international disputes.

Permit me in closing to illustrate my point. Earlier I wrote, "I jettisoned my plans for Harvard Law and forged ahead with letters of recommendation to Baffin Island Community College." A lazy reader might well interpret that to mean I forged letters of recommendation to Baffin Island instead of that I forged ahead to obtain genuine letters of recommendation.

Obviously, nothing could be further from the truth. •

Bugged

K.V. Skene

Night—black as my ex-lover's hair:
moth-winged as his mouth
over here... over there...

Ring around roach, up ladybird's house,
out grasshopper, leafhopper,
bed-hopper, louse.

Days multifocused as bluebottle eyes;
in your face, buzzing
leg over lies.

On-the-make millipedes on-line the web;
indigenous viruses
spider my head. •

But here in the city, was I a pawn: limited, vulnerable, dime-a-dozen? Almost an unworkable choice, save that a pawn masked its true potential.

He Immortal, Evergreen She

Tony Pi

I was trying to beat Bandit at chess in Robson Square when the dryad found us.

February in Vancouver meant cherry blossoms, not snow. Sure, we had days of solid rain, but when the sun shone, bears like us came out of hibernation to play the game of kings.

Bandit was Grandmaster of psychological warfare. He knew I played chess the way I fought a forest fire: find it fast, hit it hard, attack where the need was greatest. The fire was your only world until you mastered it; so too with chess. Thus, he tried to break my focus with mind games.

He tapped out a cigarette from his pack. "Got a light, Rap?"

"Never touch the stuff." I redoubled my assault on his King. "Comes with the job." Though, to look at us, you'd swear Bandit was the firefighter. I kept my weight down for the rappel work, while he was heavier-set. Fact was, he used to be a lumberjack before he lost his right arm. How he lost it remained a subject of much bet-taking. My twenty was on bear-wrestling.

Bandit balanced a matchbox on top of my rook. "At least lend a hand?"

"They're friction matches! Do it yourself."

He freed a match. "I'll use this tree then." He grinned and turned to strike the match against the maple behind him. But a young woman gently blocked his hand with hers. Bandit looked up, and gasped in recognition. His cigarette fell.

"It *is* you. The years have been kind," she said. The woman looked twenty, with cedar-red hair and evergreen eyes, in stark contrast to Bandit's ice and blue. Dressed in business casual, she looked like any other passer-by. Thing was, I couldn't tell you when she came to peer over Bandit's shoulders.

Her sudden appearance at our chess corner drew the others like dumpster-divers to an empty can. Street chess, more often than not, was a man's pastime. It wasn't that women weren't welcome, but the nature of the venue likely diminished its appeal to the fairer sex. That this siren would come into our world, broke us from the spell of our games.

"How'd you find me?" spat Bandit.

"I didn't come for you," she replied, then appraised me with her eyes. My throat went dry.

Bandit stood. "Will you do to him what you did to me?"

"If he plays my games."

I was puzzled. "Introduce us?"

"I'll have no part of this. Walk away, Rap." He kicked my crutch. "Or hobble, crawl, fly. Death follows her."

Raptor's my handle. Used to work Rapattack for the Ministry of Forests, fighting lightning fires out of Salmon Arm. Folks thought it meant 'rapid attack', but it didn't; I was part of a helicopter rappel crew. I loved the challenge but didn't care much for the isolation. Last August, after I hurt my leg fighting a wildfire in the Interior, I returned to Vancouver to recoup. When I rediscovered chess at Robson Square, I became addicted. Once, high on a winning streak, I boasted what I did for Rapattack. From then on, they branded me Raptor.

The marks thought we called the old man Bandit on account of his missing arm, 'til he robbed them of their pocket change in a game of blitz chess. I didn't know his real name. Didn't need to. Street chess rep wasn't Kaspovs and Kasparovs, faceless immortal names. Face and skill were all we were.

Bandit left our game unfinished and lumbered north along Howe.

He forgot his chess clock and board. He was serious!

The woman took Bandit's place on the concrete slab and began to reset the board. "Call me Caissa." *Ky-ee-sah*. The name sounded familiar. "And you?"

I almost said my real name, but Bandit's warning made me cautious. "They call me Raptor, or just Rap. What's between you and Bandit?"

"Our paths crossed years ago, before the war."

"Which war?"

"Does it matter?" She winked. "Mind if I play Red?"

"Be my guest." I glanced down the block. Bandit lingered just beyond the Art Gallery, smoking and watching. I shrugged and turned back to Caissa. "You said you came for me. I'm flattered, but why seek me out?"

She placed the final pawn. "I'm drawn to men who are not aware of their full potential. I sensed something in the way you played, but I need to be sure. Show me who you are." She presented the board with a flourish. "This is your world. Define yourself by the first piece you move."

I grasped her metaphor. White had a choice of only two pieces to move at the beginning of the game, knight or pawn. Was I the knight, gallant and unstoppable? In the forest I was: the helicopter was my steed. Did she expect a knight in shining armor?

But here in the city, was I a pawn—limited, vulnerable, dime-a-dozen? Almost an unworkable choice, save that a pawn masked its true potential. If it fought its way to the eighth rank, it could promote to almost anything—even a queen. The only piece it could not become was king. Did she mean that I was a pawn, waiting to come into my power?

An inspiration struck me. I held my hand over the king's knight. "If this is my world, Caissa, then clearly I have you at a disadvantage. It's only fair that I even the odds. I'll spot you a knight—" I said, removing the piece from the board, "and a bishop." The bishop followed. "Now that we've evened the odds, I can castle." I shifted the white king two spaces right and hopped the king's rook over it. "I'm neither a pawn or a knight, but king of my castle."

I was smug about my answer, but the moment I let go of the rook, the world began to spin. I steadied myself, slamming my hand on top of the board. But while my vision steadied, the jolt toppled all the

pieces. The crowd peppered me with concern, but I forced a smile. I said I was fine, though I wasn't: there was a new awareness that I couldn't quite place, and intrusive images of war flickered through my mind.

"Bravo!" Caissa steadied my head with a hand, and my nausea subsided. Her touch was soft and warm. "You may be the one I seek. Go home and dream. We'll meet again." She stood and leaned forward to kiss my forehead. She cast a final glance at Bandit, then crossed Robson and vanished up the stairs to the gardens of the Provincial Court.

I was bewildered. Who was this bewitching woman? I looked for Bandit, hoping he could explain, but he too had gone.

I hobbled home with Bandit's chess set, intending to return it to him tomorrow. It was a strange walk. Patterns kept leaping out at me. For instance, as I came down Pendrell, I passed a file of parked cars. Look at the reflections in the passenger window and pay attention to the side-view mirror. The reflection in that reflection would let you see the sidewalk behind you without turning your head. It wasn't magic, just something always there, only I never noticed.

I was house-sitting for my brother while he was on sabbatical. Back at his condo, I logged on and surfed the Web for references to her name. I found a chess poem entitled *Caissa*, written by Sir William Jones in 1763, based on an older poem, *Scacchia Ludus*.

In the poem, Caissa was a dryad, the patron goddess of chess players. The Roman god Mars fell in love with her, but she scorned him. On the advice of a nymph, Mars commissioned the creation of a game to win Caissa's heart: chess.

Could she be the goddess Chess?

Preposterous, but for my unexplained dizziness and visions. They beat the vertigo out of us during training. What about the pattern recognition? Was that a boon for winning her game? If so, it would prove invaluable in chess, where the patterns you miss often doomed you.

On a lark, I booted up a chess program. I hadn't played one in ages, seeing as how I always lost. But as the game progressed, I started seeing hundreds of combinations, four or five moves deep. Not winning ones, but I could sense which moves led to certain defeat. I played the computer AI to a draw, three times!

I was pleased with how much better I played, though I remained wary of this ability to foretell disaster. More like than not, it came with

a price; the gift itself told me so. It made me wonder what Bandit meant when he said, *death follows her*.

Go home and dream. An odd turn of phrase for a farewell, but perhaps she meant it literally.

What would my dream unlock tonight?

I went to bed early, pondering the mystery that was Caissa.

I dreamt of war. Legions of men clashed, and rivulets of their blood drained into the grass. I escaped them and raced into the forest for sanctuary. I found I didn't need a crutch here. When I could no longer hear men dying, I sank to the ground to catch my breath.

She came out of the forest mists then, a shawl over her rose-red dress. "Come." I followed her to a resplendent maple where a ruddy-bearded man snored beneath its boughs. Under that golden, ruby-studded crown was a young Bandit, both arms whole and his hair not yet white.

Bandit resembled the Red King, like in *Through the Looking-Glass*. That book had sparked my obsession with chess at age seven, when I got curious about the chess diagram that started the book. I asked my brother about it, and he taught me how to play.

"Wake him," she urged.

I remembered the conundrum from the book. "Who dreams whom? If he wakes, would I vanish?"

She shook her head. So I slid through the veil of falling keys to Bandit's side. I stole his crown and nudged his arm.

His eyes opened. I saw in his blue pupils reflections of what he dreamt.

Carnage.

His hands lashed out and choked me. I thrashed until I woke, my sheets drenched with sweat. I'd only been asleep a few hours, but I was certain something terrible happened while I slept. With dread, I flipped the television on.

A terrorist attack headlined the news. Bombings in Madrid.

Bandit had dreamt it, and so did I.

I ambushed her at the Supreme Court.

There were two northern entrances to the Supreme Court of British Columbia, one on Smithe and the other above it, accessible

only from an overhead walk from the rooftop gardens of the Provincial Court. She left by the latter doors at noon, looking as radiant as she did the day before. She seemed surprised yet pleased that I found her.

"How did you know?" she asked, taking my arm.

"Patterns led me here," I replied. "One, your clothes suggested you had a formal rendezvous. Two, you vanished into these gardens, not exactly a thoroughfare. Three, Bandit was a logger when he lost his arm. Curiously, the trial for an anti-logging protester started this week, regarding charges of eco-terrorism in Ucluelet. Are you connected with that case?"

"I'm a friend of the accused," she admitted as we walked through the gardens. "I have a vested interest in protecting the environment. Does that surprise you?"

"Not in the least. But at what cost? How is hurting people to save the forest different from hurting people in the name of any other cause?"

"There are things in this world worth fighting for," she argued.

I flashed the front page of my newspaper. "I dreamt Madrid. You invaded my sleep. If you changed me, I deserve to know why, dryad."

"Let's talk in the gallery." She pointed across Robson at the banner hanging from the facade of the Vancouver Art Gallery. The current exhibits were *Determined Pursuit*, *Canvas of War*, and *the Divine Comedy*. How apropos.

In the *Canvas of War* exhibit on the second floor, my sharpened awareness made a simple stroll past the paintings excruciating. The depictions of war drew me beyond their frames, thrusting me into the fray. I shared the shame and horror felt by victims of war and soldiers in the trenches. But at the same time, I dissected the war as a general would, as a cold, bloodless game of numbers. Each scene made me question the strategic importance of that manoeuvre: gemit or error? It was carnage without emotion, in sharp contrast to the suffering in the field. The disturbing sensations made each step gruelling.

The clash between passion and impulsion became so great that I stumbled to a halt. "Tell me what you want. Why this power?"

She looked at me with ancient eyes. "Love, naturally. Isn't the point of chess the pursuit of a mate? Chess and War in love, as it was meant to be. I thought you'd see the pattern."

I couldn't deny that I was attracted to her. She was a divine beauty, and her mystery made her all the more tantalizing. But could I love her, for what she wanted of me? "I'm no god, much less a god of carnage."

"Do you wonder where old gods go? Some fade without worship, but some embody ideas so fundamental to the human condition that they never truly die. Like the spirit of war, who lives immortally in the heart of every man." She touched my cheek. "In some, the spirit blazes, the god eager to burst its shell."

"And Bandit?"

"He had the potential. Still does. But he hadn't the courage to take the final step. I think you do. See how these remembrances inure you to the sacrifices you must make, as a god of war?"

"I don't condone these atrocities!" I gestured at the scenes of carnage. "How can you? I thought nymphs were peaceful spirits. What rots you from within, that a nature spirit would love war?"

"Where does blood go on a battlefield?" She pointed at the barren tree in a painting before us. "Drunk by grass and the roots of trees. Why should it astonish you that Man poisons Nature? You already make sacrifices, warrior. When you war against fire, you make firelines and burn out the vegetation in-between, killing the few to save the whole forest. You've the soul of a hero, Raptor, be it a champion of Nature or Man."

"A man is not a pawn. A tree is not a man. You think hero and war belong in the same breath. I cannot love a woman who thinks that."

"The skill for war needn't be used for atrocities," Caissa offered. "It can be a tool for freedom in the hands of a good man. Why not embrace the power and turn it against tyranny? Become Mars and be mine, forever."

Immortality! Mine but for a payment in lives, and quite likely my soul.

I thought I caught a familiar silhouette, disappearing around the corner.

"Bandit," I whispered, and ushered Caissa towards the elevator. "I'd better talk to him. Wait for me upstairs."

I tracked Bandit to the *Divine Comedy* exhibit. He leaned nonchalantly against a wall in a corner past the Keaton photos, eyeing a fire-hose behind glass. "No axe. Pity," he said. "Why'd you invade my

nightmare, Rap?"

"I wasn't aware it was your dream until it was too late," I answered.
"Tell me about her."

"Pearl Harbor 1940, a year before the Japanese attack," Bandit began. "I was eighteen, a military brat ready to take on the world. She breezed into my life and seduced me."

"You were in love?"

He shook his head. "At that age, you didn't think with your head; I tasted power and wanted more. But after I beat her at her second game, my new instincts warned me that death would come to my family and friends. Thinking that I was the cause, I ran and hoped I'd lure disaster away. I was wrong."

"An octogenarian! I would have placed you at fifty."

"The first two games gave me longevity, but as I never played her third game, I didn't become her immortal love. I escaped to Canada, found work up and down the coast. I could run from her, but it took years to still the nightmares."

"How did you silence the dreams?"

"I started cutting down trees, devoting my life to fighting her and her kind. That is, until I lost my arm. Some protesters had spiked the logs at a mill I worked at. A spiked log hit a rotary saw and shattered it. Pieces went flying and my right arm was in the way." Bandit shook his head. "They think they're saving trees by sabotaging the machinery, but they forget the people who work there. After I was forced off the job, the nightmares returned. The only thing that fed the war-hunger was chess. I was doing good, till you showed up in my dream."

"Sorry."

"Look, Rap, I'm concerned about you. You didn't run, and now she's got you pinned. Do you want to end up haunted, like me? Bail while you can, buddy."

"Isn't there any way to give back the power?"

"Not that I've found. Don't play any more games."

"What if one of us became Mars?" I asked. "Maybe the other would be freed."

"You're tempted, aren't you? If you thought walking through that gallery downstairs was bad, it gets far worse. You either endure the pain, or give in and let your heart be turned to stone. Remember that when she offers you eternal life." Bandit grit his teeth. "Tell her she's

got till midnight to make like a tree, or I might resort to something drastic."

"That a threat? Don't even think about hurting her, Bandit."

"Chivalrous as always. I won't touch a hair on her, I promise. Anyway, I'll leave you to find your own heart."

There was one last thing I needed to know. "Bandit? Do you regret leaving Pearl Harbor?"

Bandit shot me a parting glance. "Every day."

The Emily Carr exhibit was on the fourth floor, and I found the tranquil scenes Carr painted a welcome relief from the psychic assaults downstairs. Her depictions of the British Columbian forest soothed me, reminding me of the alpine forests. I paused to drink in the peace of one that showed a forest path meandering into the wood's dark heart.

I found Caissa mesmerized by a painting of a tree stump. "Emily called these screamers," she said, pointing to the jagged ridges of wood that crowned one edge of the stump. "When the loggers cut down the trees, all they leave are these little tombstones."

"You knew her?"

She nodded. "Two things I love: the forest and war. Emily too loved the forest."

"Was there a time you did not love war?"

"Perhaps." Caissa became somber. "What did Bandit say?"

"He warned me about you, and wants you to leave. I don't know what he's planning, but I think you better go."

She refused. "Do you know the game of *Ghost*?"

"No."

"It's a two-player word-game. The first player—call him Odd—names a letter of the alphabet. The next player—call her Even—must add a second letter to it, trying to build a word that begins with those letters. To win, maneuver your opponent into completing a real word in English. If you think your opponent is bluffing with a non-existent word, you can challenge him. If he cannot provide the word, he loses."

"Imagine a perfect Ghost strategy for Even, a god algorithm, if you will. Take the letter Y, for example. If Odd begins with Y, Even cannot choose A, C, E, I, O or U, because she'll be forced into the words *yank*, *yang*, *yclept*, *yegg*, *ylem*, *yippee*, *yoicks*, and *yuan*. But if Even follows with T,

she can win with the words *ytterbium* or *yttrium*. Do it for all letters and you have your god algorithm."

I saw the similarity between Ghost and chess. "These god algorithms are real? An algorithm for chess—"

"And war. It's no trivial power."

"But why me? Why not find a real soldier?"

"You think you're safe from war, here?"

Dread filled me as a new pattern emerged. "War's coming here, isn't it?" In this day and age, terrorism was a breed of war. It could strike anywhere, anytime. New York. Madrid. How about Vancouver, one of the biggest sea ports in North America?

"Imagine it. Not enough x-ray or gamma-ray machines to pry into the million containers a year. Nuclear or bio-terror weapons could be smuggled into port with very little chance of discovery. Security upgrades will be long time in coming, and a terrorist strike might happen well before. But you could prevent it," she coaxed. "I gave him a chance to take the power at Pearl Harbor, to save them all. But he couldn't make the sacrifices needed to change the world. I won't lie to you: it will be a hundred times harder than your walk through *Canvas of War*. But I promise you, I'll be with you every step of the way."

The choices weren't as black and white as I thought. Refuse the gift and leave the city to whatever doom was coming, or accept it and sacrifice my peace of mind for my city. Both were burdens. Was there a third, hidden choice?

"I need time to think," I said.

Caissa nodded. "You know where to find me."

It was a life-changing decision, and I would've told her to come back in a year. But Bandit was threatening to do something foolhardy tonight, and I didn't know how soon the attack on Vancouver would come.

I went back to the *Divine Comedy*. This was a divine puzzle I was trapped in, so perhaps I could find some insight here. I revisited the Goya etchings. Francisco Goya satirized the tumultuous period after the French Revolution in Spain, and often merged demons and animals with his work, caricaturing the madness that came with war. *Para eso habeis nacido*, said the caption under an etching of a grave. *This is what we were born for*.

I wasn't trying to escape death; that wasn't the allure. What tempted

me was the power to do good. I grew up in North Vancouver. If I turned Caissa down and ran back to Salmon Arm, I'd be turning my back on my hometown. Bandit regretted not staying. So would I. I thought of myself as a good man. But could I bear the burden, sacrifice men's lives for a greater good? And if I turned Caissa down, who's to say that the next candidate she found wouldn't abuse his power?

I returned to *Canvas of War*. I fought against the ghosts and found what I was looking for: visitor comments posted on the walls about the exhibit. I read them all. Some were written by children who didn't understand what war truly was, only that it was bad. Some were written by war vets, abhorring the evils of war but accepting its necessity in the pursuit of freedom. Still others told of fathers, brothers, men and women lost long ago, who sacrificed their lives so their kin could live free of tyranny.

Meditating on those voices helped me make my choice.

She was waiting for me under the maple.

"I accept your challenge," I said. "Let's play the second game."

She nodded. "What made you decide?"

"Liberty starts with someone taking responsibility to right the wrongs, even though the sacrifices and the burden on the soul seem unbearable. But men and women throughout the ages have made their mark doing just that, and they gave their lives to save others." I shook my head. "I think we sometimes forget that, living in the freedom built on their blood."

"So the will is there. But what about cunning? Can you beat me in a game of chess?"

She reached for the board, but I intercepted her hand and held it in mine. "Play it my way. All we need is the clock."

"A blindfold game?"

"Your word-game analogy inspired me." Though this would be my first boardless game, I was confident that I could keep the entire game in my head. "Mate for a win, or if your opponent runs out of time. Fair?"

Caissa nodded. "Red again, for me."

Catching wind of a spectacular match, the others abandoned their own games and surrounded us. Fingerslip, another regular, set up his own board out of our sight, so that 'mere mortals' could follow our

game.

"Knight to king's bishop three." I tapped the clock.

"Pawn to queen's four." Tap.

Soon, we were sparring with words, punctuated by rhythmic taps. Feints and pins came fast to mind, but I chose my moves based on a peculiar strategy. The best moves weren't the ones that led to a material advantage; I intended to win by an economy of words. For instance, if I had a choice between *queen's bishop takes pawn at king's rook six* or *bishop to queen's two*, I chose the latter. I wanted her to exhaust her time first.

Caissa soon caught on to my strategy, and switched to a different notation: English Algebraic, like *e5* for 'pawn to king-five' or *Ne6* for 'knight to king-six'. It bought her precious seconds.

But I switched to algebraic as well, and picked moves that forced her to disambiguate her pieces (if two identical pieces could both move to the same spot, you had to make it clear which piece you meant). Translation: more wasted breath.

She changed her tactics again, and almost lured me into a perpetual check. A draw would have thwarted my delaying game, but I caught the trap in time and maintained my advantage.

The hands on the clock kept ticking, raising the tiny green flags. If hers fell before mine, I'd win.

I closed my eyes to block out all distractions and kept my finger on the button.

Click. Click. Click. I wasn't sure which ones were mine anymore. Suddenly, the buzzer went off, and the spectators roared. My head exploded with pain. I fought the urge to throw up and cracked open my eyes. Her flag had fallen, and I had seven seconds to spare.

People were patting me on the back, congratulating me on my spectacular win. But I wasn't paying attention. My awareness had spiked, and the memories haunting me became sharp, bombarding me with suffering and death.

"Congratulations. A well-deserved win." Caissa leaned over to kiss me. My dizziness receded as our lips touched.

I pulled back. "What now?"

"Go home and dream," she repeated.

"Not to be forward, but—come with me?" I suggested. "If I'm with you, Bandit's less likely to try something."

"I thought you'd never ask."

On the way home, I kept checking behind me with the trick I learned yesterday, but I couldn't be sure if Bandit was following us. Was it just paranoia?

Caissa and I talked over dinner about her work to save the environment and what I did for the Ministry. Caissa avoided talk about her past, while I dodged questions about how I felt.

Truth was, things were moving too fast. I still hadn't told her my real name. Given the circumstances, I thought it best not to bandy my true name. We had barely met, and already the word 'forever' was on the table. If that word was frightening from a metaphorical standpoint, it was infinitely more terrifying when it was literal.

"Is the attraction there?" she asked.

I hesitated before nodding. "You're extraordinary, Caissa, everything a man could dream of. But let's take time to get to know each other, first. This power alone will take me years to accept. What if we can't see eye to eye?"

"If you pass the third test, I'm willing to wait," she assured me.

Even though I was exhausted, we stayed up talking until a half-hour past midnight, to make sure that Bandit didn't come knocking on my door. I turned the alarm on, just in case. Being the gentleman, I offered her the master bedroom, but she insisted that the guest room would be fine.

"Pleasant dreams, Raptor."

I dreamt of her again.

We met in the forest, beneath the maple tree. Wordlessly, we embraced. She was ivy and I stone: her delicate tendrils caressed and climbed my granite body, crowning me with morning glory. I became a kiss of sunlight and she ice; she glistened and shivered under my heat.

We made love, until the nightmare came.

The air grew hot, and I smelled burning wood. We tore apart and became ourselves again. I saw plumes of smoke and an orange glow upslope. "Fire! It must be Bandit. He's changing my dream."

Bandit set the dream-forest on fire somehow, and drew on my memories of wildfires. I gauged the wind: strong, blowing downhill because it was night. The flames would fan towards us, and tumbling

embers would speed the fire. Forest fires spread faster than most people realize; it would soon reach us.

"He's after you, Caissa. We've got to run!" I led her through the woods. I turned and saw a cloud of billowing smoke, whose plumes took the shapes of Goya's demons. They were swiftly gaining.

Running wasn't the solution. I knew what I had to do. "Keep running, Caissa. I'll deal with him." I stopped running.

She disobeyed me and came back. "Rap, it's too dangerous! Your power hasn't come into its own. His has."

"My dream, sweet nymph. My battle."

She looked at me with sad eyes, but understood. "Come for me, my love."

I gave her one last kiss before she dashed into the green shadows. Then, I turned to face Bandit's demons.

They billowed over me but left me untouched. Striding behind them was young Bandit. He struck a match and touched its flame to his cigarette, then flicked the matchstick towards a tinder-dry tree. The tree burst into flames.

"You know how I used to chop down my nightmares? Looks like burning dream-trees does the trick too. I told you to warn her, didn't I?"

"Bandit, why are you doing this?"

He took a long drag. "My war's not with you, Raptor. I'm trying to save you."

"There must be a peaceful way to resolve this! I'm willing to take the mantle of Mars, free you at last."

"You can't guarantee it'll work. Who's to say that there's only one Mars? We've seen great dictators throughout history; maybe they were all Caissa's pawns! No, pal, I have to stop her."

I rushed him, but he had already dissipated into smoke.

The forest continued to burn. I knew I had to extinguish it, but how? Bandit had started the fire by borrowing from my memories, I reasoned. I could do the same.

Fire needed oxygen, fuel, and heat. I had to attack the heat. I conjured up the memory of a vicious rainstorm without the lightning. The rain beat down and doused the flames, while I raced forward to track Caissa. I shouted to her, but there was no answer. All I found was the stump of a maple and its screamers.

Maybe Bandit didn't mean to attack her in the dream!

I forced myself to wake.

It was dawn, and Caissa was gone. I thought I caught the scent of sawdust.

I stumbled out of bed and checked the windows, the alarm, the chain on the door. Intact. No signs of forced entry or exit.

Where did she go?

I found her note tucked in Bandit's chess tube.

Sweet Rap,

Thank you for the sensuous dream. I know you're the one, but as you said, you need time to decide what you truly desire. I give you the gift of time, such as it is. Use the power you have wisely. When you're ready, find me.

Love, 'Caissa

A date—not today's—was written under her signature. My stomach churned. Doomsday.

The dread feeling hadn't gone. My intuition told me I had to go back to where it all started: Robson Square.

I hobbled along Robson. Something Bandit said in the dream triggered a new pattern, and I mulled it over in my head. If I was right, it could change the entire game.

I was a block away when I saw the fallen tree and the flashing lights. Caissa's maple had been cut down.

Bandit was bantering with the police. I supposed a one-armed man wasn't a top suspect for a chainsaw vandal, but I could conceive of a dozen strategies of how Bandit could have done it and not get caught, given our powers. It didn't matter to me how he did it, only that he did.

Playing up the part of another innocent citizen, I joined them. The police admitted that they had no leads, and that whoever it was, was either a lucky bastard or a gutsy genius. They promised to have the tree removed by mid-morning, to free up the spot for chess players. I thanked the officers, then pulled Bandit aside for a chat on the steps of the Art Gallery.

"A shame about the tree," he said.

"I know you did it, Bandit." I handed him back his chess set. "But I don't think you needed to."

"She gone?"

"Yeah." I told him about the note. "But that's not what I meant. I'm not sure she was a dryad."

"Huh?"

"I think she might be another aspect of War. Maybe not Mars, the god of carnage, but Minerva, the goddess of strategy. I don't know. It came to me after you said, *my war's not with you*. But it was a war between you and her."

"She has the same uncanny skill we have. That might be explained away by her purported connection to chess, but she showed more love for war than she did the tranquility of trees. After all, she has ties to an eco-terrorist, hardly a shining example of peaceful protest. Perhaps she really thought she was Caissa. Trees might have the same calming effect on her. But in reality, she is War looking for War. Maybe she isn't a nymph, just once human."

"Like us." Bandit considered this. "If that's true, was there ever a Caissa?"

"I think so." I stared down at the foot of the steps. There was a labyrinth pattern set into the tiles that I never noticed before. "She was right about one thing. War is in every man's heart—but so is peace. I think the real Caissa is that peace, meant to temper Mars' bloodlust. She's just lost in deeper in the maze. We only need to look hard enough."

"How?"

"Resigning the third game," I said. "You don't make peace with more war."

Bandit considered this. "But someone will still embody war, in the end. When one player resigns, the other automatically wins. Doesn't someone always come out on top?"

"I would have risked the full burden," I said. "I still might. She knew it would have cost me, if she forced me into it too soon. That's why she left. I'm grateful she gave me time."

"She has a heart, after all." He looked over at the downed tree. "I almost feel sorry."

"Forget it. What say you and I see about saving a city?" I showed him the date on the note.

Bandit blanched. "That soon? But neither of us have Mars' full algorithm. How will we stop it?"

"Two talents are better than one. Maybe together, we can save the future." I extended my hand, and we shook.

I was going to miss fighting forest fires. But there were new fires to put out.

And maybe one day, I'd find Caissa. •



You're here because
you love the arts...

So are we.

Harboring the Secret Artist

N. V. Bennett

I would dream of flowing rivers
flush of garnet swirls
your life's blood pumping
on my artist's palate.

I would wake and try and paint you
and find you
pale as an alabaster egg
cold as grey veined marble
washed out and empty beside me.

Licking my lips, before the paint dries
I smile and remind your ghost who haunts the canvas

all good art is eternal
but first must be internalized. •

He and his mother ate lunch on
the back deck, and it was
almost as if the warm breeze
whispering through the trees
was really whispering to him.
*Come on in, Tom, check it
out, buddy.*

The Tree

Jack Skillingstead

The movers were still hauling furniture into the new house when Tom Davis decided to climb the back fence and explore the ten acres of wild woods that had somehow survived years of encroaching development. He was eleven years old, had been living with his divorced mother in a one bedroom apartment. His new step-father owned not only the big frame house, but the woods as well. And according to Charlie (Tom could not force himself to call the man "Dad") development would not be held off much longer.

He dropped from the top of the fence and landed on his feet. Immediately Tom was struck by how quiet it was. No birds sang, no flies buzzed, not a living creature moved in the stillness. It was like having cotton stuffed in his ears. He could hear the pulse of his own blood but nothing more.

The fence boards were six feet tall. On the side that faced his backyard they looked new, the blond wood clean and unblemished in the August sun. But on this side the boards appeared old and weathered, gray, tired, as if they had stood for time out of mind, a border between these dark woods and the sunny lawn and fruit trees on the other side. Tom squinted through a knothole in the fence, saw his mother standing in front of the sliding glass door directing a couple of men in jeans and tee-shirts carrying a sideboard. The slider was open but Tom

couldn't hear his mother's voice. He pulled back, turned, and walked into the woods.

He felt drawn, pulled in. It was hot. He stumbled along in a kind of daze, weaving through the pathless woods, through sun and shadow, until he came to the tree.

The trunk of the tree was gnarled and twisted. Its thick roots burst above the ground like partially buried bones. About fifteen feet up, the branches spread like the fingers of an unclenching fist. And nestled in that cool leafy altitude was a kid's tree house. The boards were nailed haphazardly together. A moon-shaped window tilted drunkenly in one wall. A spine of irregularly spaced rungs climbed the central trunk, the nail heads dark with rust. Tom knew he had to climb them, but first he reached out and touched the tree. Immediately he pulled his hand back and wiped his fingers on his jeans. The tips of his fingers were sticky with sap. He rubbed harder but the sap clung to his skin like glue.

Suddenly he didn't feel like climbing up the tree house. All he wanted to do was get away.

He started backing off from the tree, and that was when he noticed the dead squirrel pinched in the crook of two roots. He bent over to look. The squirrel was emaciated, starved, its fur mangy. Dried blood stained its claws and teeth, and its tail was ripped where the squirrel had tried to chew through it.

• • •

At home Tom washed his hands in the bathroom sink, really scrubbing at the sap on his fingers. But no matter how hard he scrubbed, the sap remained.

His mother appeared in the doorway, leaning against the jamb. Her face was flushed, a few strands of yellow hair plastered to her sweaty cheek.

"So where did you disappear to all morning?"

"Just looking around" he said, concentrating on his fingers. "Besides, I was only gone a little while."

"Honey, it's past noon. Your father called at lunch and I couldn't tell him where you were."

Stepfather, Tom thought. Then: *noon?* Of course he must have been gone more than a half hour. The movers were gone, most of the kitchen stuff was put away. Finally he looked at the clock. He thought

hard but could not remember anything after he had noticed the dead squirrel. He couldn't even remember climbing back over the fence. There was the squirrel, and then he was shuffling into the bathroom, picking up the oval bar of pink soap, turning the water on hot. That was all.

• • •

At dinner his stepfather, Charlie, reached over and patted him on the shoulder, ruffled his hair.

"Earth to Tom," he said.

Tom looked up, distracted from his thoughts. "Huh?"

"How do you like the new digs, Tommy?"

"Fine."

"Fine, he says."

"He loves the house," Tom's mother said, interpreting for him as always. "We both do."

• • •

Tom lay in bed, sticking his fingers together, unsticking, sticking them together then pulling them apart again. His mother knocked once, walked in. He stopped playing with his fingers. She sat on the edge of the bed, brushed his hair from his eyes.

"How's my little man?"

"Good."

"This is better than that tiny apartment, isn't it?"

"I like having my own room," he admitted. "But I still have to fix it up."

"There'll be plenty of time. Go to sleep now, okay? Another big day tomorrow."

"Right."

She clicked off the table lamp, kissed him, left him alone. He lay quietly in bed. Played with his sticky fingers. Smelled them. The sap smelled sour, not a good smell at all.

• • •

He leaned against the fence, peering through the knothole. It was an ordinary wood filled with morning sunlight and shade. No birds, though. A hand fell on his shoulder and he jerked around.

"Hi," he said to his stepfather. "I thought you went to work already."

"Tom, you remember what I said about those woods?"

"Sure."

Charlie hunkered beside him. He was a tall man, older than Tom's mother. It seemed like he always wore a suit. Even on weekends he wore a button up shirt. Tom liked to picture his real father in blue jeans and a black tee-shirt, though he had no idea what his real father wore or even what he'd looked like.

"It isn't safe, Tommy. Just consider it off limits. I have my reasons, believe me I do. Why don't you help your mother today? There's a lot of work to do around the house. What do you say?"

"I'll help her."

"My man!"

Tom didn't go into the woods, not even after Charlie left. He helped his mother straighten up the house, put stuff away, clean. But he felt drawn to the woods. He wanted to see that tree house again. He and his mother ate lunch on the back deck, and it was almost as if the warm breeze whispering through the trees was really whispering to him. *Come on in, Tom, check it out, buddy.*

"What's wrong with your fingers?"

"Huh?"

"Your fingers," his mom said. "Did you get something on them?"

"Not really." He showed her his fingers because there really wasn't anything on them. They weren't sticky anymore. Only sometimes they felt sticky, just to him.

• • •

Night again. Tom couldn't sleep, couldn't stay in bed. It was hot but it was more than that. Closing his eyes felt like drowning in black water. He pulled on a pair of shorts and slipped quietly out of his room, thinking of raiding the refrigerator. Halfway down the stairs he heard voices and stopped.

His mother said, "He hates to be called Tommy, I've told you that."

"I'll mend my wicked ways," Charlie said.

"Not all your wicked ways, I hope."

Stifled laughter. They were downstairs, in the living room. *Why not have a look*, a voice asked Tom, and he couldn't ignore it.

He stood by the arch between the living room and dining room,

his back to the wall. Listening to them, hating it, but listening. He made himself look around the corner, saw their white bodies on the carpet, moving together. His mother's grimacing face straining over Charlie's shoulder.

• • •

The next day he told his mother he was walking to the Safeway store, but instead he climbed the fence and dropped into the forbidden woods. He didn't care what Charlie said.

He picked up a stick and whacked at the bushes while he walked, his feet discovering their own path. The sky seemed to darken but he was barely aware of the change. He peered inside himself at his mother's face, the way it had been last night, the way her fingers had dug into Charlie's white back.

When he looked up out of his thoughts he was confused. It was only ten acres, and from the second floor of the house he could even see to the other side of the woods, see patches of green lawn, brick chimneys, the slanted planes of rooftops. But now the woods appeared to stretch forever in all directions, the August sunlight screened out, all sounds muffled. Tom's mouth felt dry.

And there was the tree.

The great upthrusting trunk. Black, twisted and gnarled, the branches open like fingers. A different tree but the same; he saw it more clearly. The irregular wooden rungs reached to the platform like a spine.

Tom started to climb. He didn't like the feel of the wood on his bare hands. Though it was dry and hard he had the inner sense that it was unclean, spongy, rotten with age.

He pulled himself onto the platform, unaccountably tired. It was darker inside the tree house and it smelled... sick. He could only compare it to the way his grandfather's room had smelled during the last weeks of the old man's life—an odour of living decay.

He leaned back against the wall and rubbed his eyes. The quality of light seemed to shift from moment to moment. It was like being in two places at once. The moon-shaped window was there, a crescent eye open to a green, living world. Then it was gone and he was entirely closed up in a black box.

Tom wanted to get down, run back to the house, if he could find the house. But another part of him was equally curious and excited by

the strangeness. Whatever happened, he knew he would never willingly return to this place, so he didn't want to miss a thing.

He moved deeper into the tree house. Dusty sunlight slanted through chinks between the boards. He saw the desiccated body of a robin, small mummified corpses of squirrels. The scattered husks of insects crunched under his sneakers. And then he saw, in deep shadow, an object that frightened him badly, then terrified him. Tom backed away from it to the open side of the tree house.

But the opening had narrowed, almost trapping him inside. He barely managed to squeeze through. His tee shirt tore on a jag, the sharp splinter cutting into him like a tooth. As far as he could see, in any direction a dark primordial jungle stretched into smoky distance. Suddenly dizzy, Tom swayed, his vision blurring. He held onto the edge of the tree house, closed his eyes, concentrated on light. When he opened his eyes the view was back to normal. He saw lawns and houses not far away.

He swiftly climbed down, hating the feel of the wooden rungs. They looked like ordinary pieces of wood now with the rusty heads of nails embedded in them. Six feet from the ground he jumped, landed off-balance, and wound up on his hands and knees. He crawled over one of the great roots and almost put his hand on the dead squirrel he'd first seen a couple of days ago. Its corruption had progressed. Ticks lifted from the corpse as he jerked his hand back. And then he was on his feet, running through the woods, stumbling, gasping—

• • •

"Don't you ever go in there again," his mother warned. She had seen him climbing over the fence, not on his way back from, but on his way into, the woods. She said she'd called to him from the kitchen window but he'd ignored her, and by the time she'd reached the fence he was gone from sight.

"You don't know how close I came to calling the police, Tom."

"The police?"

"Charlie told you to stay out of there and for good reason."

"Charlie." Tom said, thinking of the grunting sound his stepfather had made, the white skin of his back.

"What was I supposed to think when you were gone that long?"

"I wasn't gone very long."

"Tom, I know exactly how long you were away. I know because at

the end of the first half hour I went looking for you and couldn't find you. It was over an hour more before you came back. I swear if you hadn't come back when you did—”

“I couldn't have been gone that long, Mom.”

“Tom, I can read a watch.”

• • •

Later, as he lay in bed, once again unable to sleep, there was a soft knock on his door and then it opened and his stepfather walked in.

“I'm in trouble,” Tom said.

“You're not in trouble.” Charlie sat in a chair by the bed, crossed his legs, folded his hands. He was a large man, his face long and thoughtful, his hair liberally salted with gray.

“You're old enough to hear this,” he said. “I was wrong not to tell you sooner.”

“Tell me what?”

“The reason I don't want you going into those woods is that two children have disappeared in there already.”

Tom's chest tightened.

“They were brothers,” Charlie continued. “Eight and six years old.”

“Did—”

“No one has any idea what happened to them, but there's been plenty of speculation. You know about strangers, Tom.”

Tom nodded.

“Well we don't have to go into all the possibilities. Those woods are going to be a subdivision. I've already sold it off.”

“It's old,” Tom said.

“What is?”

“Nothing,” Tom said, but he was thinking: The tree is old, older than anyone knows.

“Well.” Charlie stood and walked to the door, put his hand on the light switch. “It's late. Mind if I turn this off?”

“I guess not.”

“Try not to frighten your mother anymore.” Charlie turned the light off. Moon shadows occupied the room.

“And Tom?”

Tom looked up from the bed.

“Don't frighten *me* either.”

Alone in his bedroom Tom stared at the image in his mind. The thing in the tree house, the thing that had frightened him so much. It had been a child's black high-top sneaker, the canvas ripped violently, as if a dog had been tearing at it. And in the dark corner of the tree house he had seen the suggestion of something inside the sneaker, a stump, a dull glimmer of bone.

• • •

Tom opened his eyes and it was morning, but too early for anyone else to have gotten out of bed yet. Tom wasn't really awake himself. His eyes were open, he was aware of the room, the quiet house, but his thoughts lingered in a dream world. The tree was older than time. Before it was a tree it was something else but still the same inside.

Tom found himself standing next to his bed in his pajama bottoms, then he was on the stairs, and then outside in the backyard, the morning air cool on his bare skin. The tree knew its life in this time was almost finished, and it required one more blood sacrifice so its seed could survive. The tree had been alive longer than people. The first woman had plucked fruit from its tempting limb.

Tom dropped from the top of the fence and landed with a jarring thud on his back. It jolted him out of his trance. He looked around, shocked. The dry weeds and prickly grass scratched his skin. From where he lay the fence looked very high, a fortress wall. Around him silence prevailed.

Tom got to his feet, reached for the top of the fence, and then felt the tree's pull again, the irresistible tug, and he knew what was going to happen but was helpless to prevent it.

He jumped weakly, caught the top of the fence, and started to haul himself up even as his mind began to cloud. He hooked one arm over the top, pulled. He could see into the backyard but it was like looking through smoked glass. He already belonged to death. Charlie appeared in the kitchen window with a cup of coffee. Tom cried out feebly then dropped back to the ground, unable to hold on.

He stood at the base of the tree, looking up the huge black column of the trunk. He would climb up into the grasping hand of the branches, the place where dead things lay, and it would absorb him, *eat* him. It might leave a shred of his pajama bottoms, maybe a finger, some remnant. Or perhaps it would leave nothing. The tree devoured innocence. It had been the original tool of corruption. Later it had

acquired its own crude immortality, and it required the blood of children.

Then Tom was inside the tree, and it was like being inside the beating heart of a demon. The tree had lived ten thousand times, its dark seed had crossed continents, oceans, growing strong and tall, feeding on the blood and spirit of innocents.

Tom lay back, feeling himself pale toward death. The stink of death was around him. He turned his head and saw the opening, began to drag himself toward it. He tried to think of his mother, of their love, but it wasn't enough.

He managed to reach the edge of the platform but could do no more. He peered over the brink and saw his stepfather. Charlie shouted something at him from the base of the tree, but Tom couldn't hear him, couldn't even read the expression on Charlie's face. He knew Charlie wasn't seeing the ancient monster. He was seeing an ordinary oak tree, the one Tom had seen his first time, a beautifully leafed giant with a kid's tree house nestled in its branches.

Charlie started to climb the rungs. A faint nimbus surrounded him. Tom tried to reach out. He was weak, terribly weak. He sensed the tree's outrage and it gave him a little extra strength, arousing an outrage of his own. He felt strongly allied with the man climbing up to him. In another second the monster would bite him in half. But Charlie was there now, only a few feet below, looking up at him, a troubled expression deepening the lines of his face. Tom made a final great effort, reaching down with the lead weight of his arm, his fingers twitching, and Charlie let go with his own right hand and touched him.

Something electric sizzled between their fingertips. Charlie's expression transformed instantly to shocked incredulity.

He saw it now, saw what was really there. He *knew*.

The walls began to close, shutting like jaws, and Charlie saw that, too. He grabbed Tom's limp arm with both of his strong hands and he yanked, falling back, using his greater weight to pull Tom out and away, and then they were both falling.

Charlie held onto him all the way down.

• • •

Tom sat on the deck, his leg in a cast, a book tented open in his lap. His mom brought him a tall glass of lemonade with ice.

"I don't know how you can read with all that racket," she said.

Beyond the fence lay a flat expanse, cleared and leveled. A backhoe was busy digging a hole that would eventually become somebody's basement.

"It's not that bad," Tom said. "I kind of like it."

"Weirdo."

He smiled up at her. "The weirdest."

"Do you want to come in now?"

"I think I'll sit out here and wait for Charlie." •

News Release: Ninety Percent of Dust is Made Up of Dead Skin

Mildred Tremblay

Shedding dead skin,
the housewife moves through
the rooms of her house
in a miniature snowstorm,
an invisible snowstorm of death.

It falls on her tables, it falls on her chairs,

it falls on her children
who skip through the rooms
sloughing their bits
of unwrinkled demise

while the cat on the rug
adds its feline flakes
in calico drifts,
a little cat death
mixed into the mess.

At dinner, a fine sprinkle
of corpse
falls on the plates,
settles into the pasta, the soup
and there the family sits,

eating themselves. •

Picasso

Mildred Tremblay

The summer of her transition
she did what cats do late at night:
prowled, hid in shrubs listening
to the green creak of grass,
the thunder of a beetle's slow march.

Flat as a shadow, belly brushing
the ground, she whipped across roads.
One night she brought down a mouse,
tore its head off with her teeth.

The next day she was visited by the light.

It poured out of the slashed naked backs
of the Picasso on the wall, the women
in blue at the bar, the flesh
between their shoulders axed open
with dark lakes of paint.

It was small, a pool of sun dust,
but it shivered and grew, filling the room.
All day she sat with the headless body
of the mouse on the floor,
light pouring out of the hole in its neck. •

The creature, unlike other neighborhood goings on, touched a darkened part of herself, a part she preferred to keep buried.

Neighborhood Watch

Suzan Tessier

Virginia Wade first saw the creature on top of her neighbor's roof fifteen days ago.

Normally, she would have dealt with the problem by now. When gas fumes from the Harrison's boat had wafted down the street three years ago, Virginia had immediately called 911. When Evelyn Degrady's general contractor had strewn debris on the sidewalk last summer, Virginia had seen to it that the mess was tidied.

Although no one thanked Virginia for assuming the role of neighborhood watchkeeper, she took pride in her responsibility. Her mother had always praised her level-headedness. She told Virginia it was the mark of a good person.

Virginia should have done something about the creature, but she could not. The creature, unlike other neighborhood goings on, touched a darkened part of herself, a part she preferred to keep buried. And while she may have likened her neighborhood watch duties to dusting furniture, a potential confrontation with the creature was more akin to a violent gutting of an old building.

There were only two other times in her life when she had been so flummoxed she could not act one way or another. The first time was when she found her grandfather in the basement with her thirteen-year old cousin, Ruth, and the other time was when her husband of

forty-four years shot himself in the head. Though these events sometimes polluted her dreams, Virginia found it easier not to think about them at all. Things in the past needed to stay in the past. If she ever felt guilty or sad, she certainly never admitted it.

Virginia's first awareness of the creature came one morning as she headed to her car. Out of the corner of her eye, she spied something on the Vaillancourt's black shingled roof, but when she turned, she saw only a gray mark on this side of the chimney. She eliminated the possibility of local wildlife. Anything so big - a deer or bear - could not possibly scale the sides of the Vaillancourt's two story home. Anything smaller would have left a much smaller stain.

That day Virginia put the mystery aside as she went about her chores, but upon returning home, an uneasiness fell over her. As she sat in her car, her heart thumped a beat faster than usual. She gripped the steering wheel and lifted her eyes. A black shadow darkened this side of the chimney. She blinked and the shadow was gone.

Two days passed before Virginia saw it again. She was upstairs in the sewing room putting the final touches on the baby blanket she had made for the young unmarried woman at St. Augustine's. The sewing room window faced the back yard and afforded a view of not only the Vaillancourt's yard and home, but of ten other yards and homes. Virginia saw an arm flash from the Vaillancourt's roof. The arm was slender and slick black, arched and long nailed. As Virginia spun around on her chair for a closer look, the thing disappeared. All that was left behind was a gray smudge on the black roof.

Virginia shot to her feet. She had to put a stop to this annoyance the way she had put a stop to the barking dogs, the Donnegal's free-growing tree, the wayward balls in her yard.

She wrenched open the window, stuck her head out and froze. She had to get control of herself. Others may let their emotions spill out like gas from a broken tank, but not Virginia. She had learned uncontrolled emotions did nothing more than complicate lives. Her mother used to say, "You, Virginia, are blessed. You are the stable one in this family. The one I depend on. Don't ever change that."

Virginia shut the window and waited until her shaking had calmed before she made her way down to the kitchen for a cup of tea.

When the water began to boil in her smallest yellow and brown pot, Virginia suddenly recalled the kettle her husband, Frank, had burned on the stove. Virginia had found him crying in the bathroom.

"The kettle's ruined," she said.

"I can't do this anymore. I can't live like this. Our lives are so empty. I'm empty." Frank's blood red eyes stared up at his wife.

Virginia took a step back. "I'll put the water on. It'll be all right."

But it hadn't been all right. Two days later, Virginia had found Frank dead in the garage.

Since the creature had come into her life, Virginia tried to occupy herself with sewing and volunteering to make things better. But these activities did not help because things only got worse.

One afternoon as Virginia raked the back garden, she saw the creature whole and unhidden. It stood as still as a dead lake, its black bones rippling through its black skin on the black shingled roof. Hands. Snout. Feet. Shiny, bare knees. A long hoary mane down a long hoary back. A yellow eye. The gleam of a fang. Virginia gasped, dropped the rake and ran to the back door.

She stumbled into the house and set herself down on the couch. Time passed, but she did not know how much. It was only when the late day tendrils of sunlight snaked onto the living room rug that she lifted her head. The sweat had dried on her face, leaving it tight and in need of a washcloth. Her limbs felt heavy. If only I had some help from time to time, she thought. Yes, help would make things better.

Virginia picked up the phone and began to dial her son's number. When she could not remember the digits, she dropped the receiver into her lap and stared into the darkening room.

"Bobby," she said. The last time they had spoken he had been angry about something. He was always angry about something. Unlike his mother, Bobby had never mastered control. He had started off their last phone call with an outburst.

"Jesus Christ, you gave all of Dad's stuff to the Goodwill?"

"He's gone, Bobby. A sweater won't bring him back."

Silence.

"Bobby? You'll be here for dinner on Sunday?"

"I told you. Julie's got to work."

"I don't need to see her. Come at three and bring my grandson."

"Mom, how many times have we been over this? Three on a Sunday afternoon is too early. I work all week. I have things to do on the weekend."

"Fine. It's not as though I ask a lot of you, but if you can't come at three, then come whenever you want. Just don't expect a warm meal when you get here."

It had been two years, one month and ten days since that conver-

sation. Now, Virginia stared at the receiver and had a sudden urge to slam it into the coffee table, but she had never slammed anything in her life. With a controlled breath, she hung up the phone.

For the next three days and three nights, the creature did not move from the rooftop. Every time Virginia peered out the window, there the unholy thing sat, smug in its power, complete in its evil. This morning, however, something changed.

After another sleepless night, Virginia inched to the sewing room. From its hideous perch, the creature stared at her yard, her home, her very soul, but this time she heard something; as the creature rocked back and forth, its arms like a rag doll's, its nails scratched the black shingled roof. That infernal sound brought to mind everything Virginia hated.

Anger swelled. This was her neighborhood. She would not be bullied.

Virginia put on her best floral cotton dress and white Dr. Scholl's and left the house. At first her energy seemed boundless, her determination as solid as a new building, but when she turned the corner, her pace slowed as fear snuck up.

"I must keep my eyes forward," she said, not caring who heard.

As Virginia walked, she kept herself busy by remembering the times she had knocked on the Vaillancourt's door in the past - once to remind them to trim their hedges, another to ask that they not put their bird feeder so close to her fence, and yet another to tell them their dog howled from the time they went to work until the time they came home. And each time she had visited them, a little flutter of anxiety had erupted in her chest - but always small, always containable. It did not compare to the fear that now poured like hot oil into her face and hands.

"Something must be done and I'm the only one to do it," she told herself.

She rang the bell three times before the youngest of five children answered.

"Mooooom. The old lady's here."

Virginia clasped her hands together as she waited for Mrs. Vaillancourt. After a moment, the trim, almost boyish figure of the woman appeared in the hallway. Mrs. Vaillancourt bounded to the door like a dog.

"Good morning!"

"I wonder if I might have a word?" Virginia asked.

"Is there something wrong?" The woman's long blonde hair fell

about her face. Virginia thought a ponytail would straighten things out just fine.

"I'm afraid there is."

"Oh." Mrs. Vaillancourt stepped closer, her brow now crinkled. "Was it something the children..."

"No, not this time. I wanted to know if you've had any roof disturbance?"

Mrs. Vaillancourt stared at Virginia as though she had just spoken Russian.

Virginia repeated herself.

"I thought that's what you said. I'm just trying to figure out what a roof disturbance is."

"Well, goodness! It's just as it sounds. Have you had any disturbances on your roof?"

Mrs. Vaillancourt shook her head slowly. "Do you mean like squirrels?"

"No. Something much larger."

From inside the house, a child bellowed. Mrs. Vaillancourt looked back over her shoulder and Virginia knew she had only a moment or two before she lost the woman completely. Against Virginia's better judgment, she blurted,

"Something is living on your roof that should not be there."

Mrs. Vaillancourt raised her eyebrows. "Oh?"

"Do you want to call animal control or shall I?"

Mrs. Vaillancourt took a step closer. "Are you feeling ok, Virginia?"

Virginia bristled at the uncalled for familiarity.

"I'm fine."

"I know it hasn't been easy since you lost your husband..."

"I'm fine," she repeated. "I only came by to make sure you knew about the problem on your roof."

"I guess I'll have Mark take a look at it when he gets home."

"Fine." Virginia spun away.

Although Mr. Vaillancourt's SUV appeared just before dinner, Virginia never saw him investigate the roof nor did she see any sign of the animal control van. By nine o'clock, the night had swallowed the Vaillancourt's roof into its maw and Virginia could see only the faint outline of the creature. The rolling in her belly began shortly after that.

"I must be coming down with something," she said as she stood at the top of the basement stairs. Her hands were slick with sweat, her

vision blurry and all she could think of were the photograph albums. They had been her husband's, of course. She had never been interested in mementos or keepsakes. Best to just move forward. But now, she stood like an old fool, wanting nothing more than to retrieve those useless albums her husband had carefully filled up.

She crept down the stairs, her feet feeling the chill first and then her body bubbling up with goose bumps as she stepped down onto the cement floor. It took time and effort to find the box. The dust clawed at her nose as she wrestled with the cardboard lid. Inside, dull vinyl bindings stared back at her. She chose the one which read, "Vacation 1972", but when she pulled the album out, dizziness slapped her like a blow to the back of the head. She crumpled to the floor.

The cool cement radiated up through her legs and backside. She heard a noise in the corner.

"Ruth?" she called. But it couldn't be Ruth. That was years ago. Before she could chase it away, however, the memory rushed in. It had been Aunt Lila's birthday. Grandpa needed help with the homemade wine in the basement. Ruth popped up first, her long bare legs brushing Virginia's as she ran to join Grandpa. When Virginia leapt up, too, Grandpa shooed her back.

"Help your mother with the cake, Ginny," he said as he began his descent.

Fuming and petulant, Virginia slammed the door at the top of the stairs. While everyone loved Grandpa, Virginia felt sure she loved him best. Grandpa was kind and generous. He gave her the only bike she would ever own, hard candy he bought from the fancy store downtown and paperback books that he read to her on the front porch. Above all, on Aunt Lila's birthday, ten year old Virginia did not understand why Ruth, only three years older, had been chosen to help Grandpa with the wine. Virginia had asked again and again to share Grandpa's favorite hobby, but he always told her, "You're too young."

Virginia's jealousy that day grew as she waited for Grandpa and Ruth to return to the kitchen. Finally, Virginia could wait no longer. She lost control of her emotions and snuck down to the basement. The odd grunting noise behind the washing machine alerted her, but it was when her eyes adjusted to the darkness that the horror revealed itself. Years later, at Grandpa's funeral, Ruth stood trembling before Virginia, the black tears staining her cheeks, lipstick smudged on her full lips. Her once beautiful face had turned into a caricature of itself, swollen and lined beyond its years.

"You just stood there watching. I know I was a few years older than you, but I was still a child, Ginny. Why didn't you do anything?"

Virginia stiffened. "It's in the past."

"No, it's not," Ruth said, each word growing louder than the last. "It's what I live with every day."

"Then you should learn."

"Learn what?"

"Not to."

Virginia and Ruth had never spoken again. Now, Ruth's voice was all Virginia could hear. She slapped her hands to her ears. The scene from her grandfather's basement played and replayed in her mind.

"No, Grandpa! Don't," Virginia shouted now.

She dropped her hands. Her head spun. She stood up and carried the photo album upstairs.

To Virginia's dismay, the photographs had not faded as much as her memory. There she and her husband were on a plane, in front of a motel, on a beach. "Siesta Key, 1972," the pages read, but she could not remember any of it. Not the white sand, not the ocean, not the pink floral towel.

"Frank, why did you leave me?" she cried as the album slipped to the floor.

She sucked in her breath. What was happening to her? She had never felt more unwell.

"This is nonsense."

She lit a fire, opened the album and placed it on the pyre. Then she went to the basement to retrieve the rest. After watching the last album burn, she fell into a dreamless sleep on the couch.

The next morning the creature was gone.

Though Virginia wanted to clap with joy, she padded carefully through the house, checking the windows and peeking through the doors. She even snuck outside late in the afternoon to stare up at the Vaillancourt's roof.

"Hi, Virginia."

Virginia startled. She had not seen Mrs. Vaillancourt on the other side of the fence.

"We never did find anything on our roof. But if you see the animal again, let us know."

Virginia nodded as she retreated.

That evening, she opened the kitchen window and listened to the night sounds. Crickets chirped, cars rolled by, but no creature

scratched its nails on the Vaillancourt's roof.

Later in bed, thoughts of Frank and Ruth roamed the back of her mind, but Virginia squeezed her eyes shut.

"Go away. I won't have this."

She repeated the words until her voice was hoarse and dawn drizzled in through the slats of the venetian blinds.

Virginia awoke some hours later. She blinked a few times and breathed as slowly and confidently as she could. She sat up. Nothing. She went to her dresser. As she ran her brush through her fine, white hair, she nodded. Yes, this was better. The thoughts were gone. Truly gone. Her mother had always said Virginia had more willpower than everyone in the family put together.

Virginia returned to her sewing, church events and neighborhood watch duties, but nothing felt quite right. Still, she told herself, a strong, good person moved forward, always forward, eyes ahead, focused on the future. A good person ignored the nightmares, ignored the gnawing anxiety. A good person squeezed her eyes shut and willed the bad, painful memories to the back of her mind. A good person did not harp on the past or give in to grief.

But Virginia did not know if she was a good person anymore. A good person would not fear the sound of nails scratching on her own roof. A good person would not cry out when she woke in the night to the yellow eyes staring down at her. And a good person would not plead for mercy with a creature who would not listen to reason. •

As food became scarcer he began to imagine the pages had tastes as well, but they were indescribable, foreign as quince and saffron.

Fire and Ash

M. Thomas

The first book Rubain ate was a children's story. In the secret storehouse books lay on shelves like fat loaves, and the pulp of the paper between his fingers made him salivate so badly it ran down his chin. He had been hungry enough to chew leather for weeks. It took him over an hour to eat the book, and when he was finished, he put the cover back on the shelf. To be caught with books was to be thrown on a bone fire, so he climbed empty-handed back up his rope to the roof of the storehouse, where they caught him as he reemerged.

From the window of the tower room where he was interrogated, Rubain could see the rib bones of the enormous fish rising up around the city like the spires of heaven, preserved by some curious property of sun and the strange alchemies that moved under the skin of time. They called the city Majole. Majole, in the belly of the dead fish. In the moonlight its slate rooftops looked like the stones of a cairn, and the nightly bone fires were its fireflies.

• • •

"This is the way things begin," Trevion told him at the start. "With quiet disquiet."

They stood on the left bank of the fish spine where the fine houses

were, watching the upper class parade the park circuit while they, with work passes in hand, shoveled the gravel paths clean of horse manure left behind by ladies' ponies. Trevion spit on every pile before he scooped it up and shoved it into the burlap bag slung under his arm.

"Are you quietly disquiet?" Rubain asked. "Because I've noticed you talk a lot."

Trevion kicked some dung over Rubain's shoe. "What do you know? You're too afraid of losing work to be disquiet."

Rubain shrugged. "I like to eat."

"You watch," said Trevion. "We'll do something about that old bastard in the castle, and then things will change. No more work passes to clean up the shit of their ponies. I've been meeting with some people. You should come listen."

Rubain went only after there were no work passes for a few days, and he thought he might convince Trevion to stand him an ale. In the airless back room of The Red Cockerel, Trevion stalked before a crowd of workers, prowling amongst the tables, slapping backs with his great, work-hardened paw, whispering wit. His eyes glinted green and sharp and clever in the lamplight. They called him Trey, and when it was his turn to talk, he spoke to the soul of the matter in a way that made the crowd roar:

"Do you know why they took our books? Because uneducated masses cannot pass messages that remain uncorrupted, and whispered conferences unravel from ear to ear. How well they know the short distance between us and animals. They will make beasts of us, and hitch our children to their plows!"

Rubain was enamored by this new Trey: so different from the familiar man who had taught him to cast stones for bets in the back alleys of lower Majole; who never had a father, and wept at the funeral of Rubain's like a child; who sat in Rubain's kitchen talking of this and that and things in-between; who had often picked his nose with a finger and wiped it on his breeches. There was a fire in him, and it burned them all.

That night Rubain stumbled home, singed and hot and feeling as if he were too large for his skin, knowing now that he too was one of the downtrodden lords of Majole.

It seemed a grand thing to be in the service of Trey's revolution, lighting fires of protest. Trey called Rubain the Shy Lieutenant, pointed him out of each crowd, growled and wrapped his bear-arm around Rubain's shoulder, pulling him into the light. Women pressed up against him—"Oh, it's the Shy Lieutenant, is it?"—and eventually he

took several to bed.

Then the old man in the castle decided that if they liked fires so much, they could dance on them. The first bone fires were lit in the park on the left bank of the Spine, and many of the pony riders came to see some of Trevy's boys dance. They brought food, and wine, and laughed and played music while the burning men were stripped of their skin and left naked to the bone.

The people of lower Majole, who did not have permits to attend and dared not try to pass the guarded archways to the left bank of the Spine, did not see the first bone fire. But they saw many more after that, when the soldiers began erecting them on street corners, flooding the houses with smoke at night so that no one could sleep for the smell or the screams.

Trevy's answer to the bone fires was barricades. The first three fell apart like children's toys, and they escaped only when the prison wagons and soldiers stumbled on the rubble. They got better at it over time. Several old men who had been in old wars came forward, and showed them how the construct should be just so, and the heavier items wedged just there, and the peep-holes and perches here, here, and here. Within months they had cut off access to the tanneries and cattle markets in the lower streets. Trevy's plan was to take the Spine, and then the castle near the head.

They did not make it to the Spine. An entire regiment was dispatched from the garrison, and they tightened up the streets like a noose, all the way to lower Majole where Trevy had withdrawn his small forces. They hid through the winter months in secret rooms, passing over the rooftops at night when soldiers patrolled the streets. Food grew scarce and frostbitten. They ate the cattle from the market, very few since trading season had come and gone, then began on the horses and whatever animals were left over, meant for the tanneries. When his stomach growled, Rubain often remembered how his father could make a meal of cabbage and pressed seed cakes cooked over the fire.

• • •

Rubain continued to climb down from the ceiling after the interrogation. When he went there now he brought wine to wash the books down with, and as he worked at it he found he could devour more and more in a sitting, until he could eat four, five books a night, leaving their covers on the shelves.

It helped, sometimes, to think of them as parts of him. History was the left foot and music the right, until he had devoured them all and stood firm. Theology the left leg between the foot and the knee; animal husbandry the right, although it took up the knee as well.

The left thigh was maps, so that he would know where he was going; children's stories went straight to his middle and would make him paunchy with the fat of their imaginations. Poetry was for the heart of course, and architecture for his shoulders; fiction for the left arm and almanacs for the right; his left hand he made of farming and gardening and his right hand he made of trades—woodworking, cloth dying, book binding, arrow-fletching, horse-shoeing.

Propaganda stuck in his throat, though he filed the more clever ones away in his spine. Romance, he assumed, would go to his loins, but in a capricious move went instead to his lungs where he breathed it every day like perfumed powder.

Philosophy went straight to his head, sometimes warring with poetry but not often. As food became scarcer he began to imagine the pages had tastes as well, but they were indescribable, foreign as quince and saffron.

• • •

With hunger came a lazy euphoria in which Rubain spent only part of his time repairing the barricades. More often he went looking for remnants of his father around the house. He found a bobbin of green thread under the small cabinet in his father's bedroom, and spent the afternoon going through each of its drawers, laying out buttons and a bone comb and a small pewter spoon and a cameo of his mother, whom he did not remember.

He discovered in various nooks and drawers of the household a perplexing assortment of leaves and stones collected for some reason—he'd never noticed them so he never thought to ask—and now he wondered what memory each of them held.

Every day Trevy came to console him, re-invigorate him, but Rubain shook his head. He had tired of it all, preferring instead to haunt the cupboards and the space under the bed, searching always for some little thing left behind that last morning: an escaped button his father was too rushed to pick up, the frayed threads of his shirt caught on the rough edge of the table in passing.

"I can see your spirit is broken," Trevy said one night. Then,

before it could be taken as an accusation added, "And what man's wouldn't be? I've never had a family to love. I'm jealous of all these husbands and fathers, who have had something besides Majole." He slumped down into his chair, scraped his hair back impatiently with a bitter half-smile. "It has always, only, been Majole for me. And she never once batted an eyelash my direction.

"You must do something for your father's memory, Rubain. If not at the forefront of our revolution, then behind it. We need food."

"I can look for food," Rubain said. "But there's something else."

He went to the hearth and removed a stone down near the bottom. Rooting around in the space behind it, he came up with his most precious thing.

"I keep this," he said, handing it to Trevy. "There's room for others. If there are any left."

Trevy fondled the small diary as carefully as a found egg.

"It was my father's," Rubain said. He had found it by chance as he examined the loose stone, thinking he might catch rats to eat behind it.

"I can keep books," Rubain said. "And look for food." A week later, he found the storehouse down by the wharves. It took him two days to return home. It did not seem that anyone had noticed, and he kept his sleeves pulled down to cover the rope burns on his wrists when Trevy came to talk at him about the revolution.

• • •

One morning, he found a woman at his front door. "Are you the man that keeps the books?" Wisps of gray hair hung like frost around her face, and she wore the perpetual worry of the working class in the lines at the corners of her eyes.

"No," said Rubain.

She stared at him. "I know you're the man that keeps books. Trevy said I'd find such a man here. He said there's a fellow who keeps books so they won't be lost, and to come to this street and this house."

Rubain smiled. "Keeping books is against the law, and I'm no rebel. I don't know this Trevy, but I think he's having fun with you."

Her left hand fidgeted in the pocket of her skirt. "I had to cross three barricades to get here," she said. "And the one at Pretemp has fallen. All fire and screaming. They set up a bone fire there, you know. I saw a little girl burn on it. I asked the soldiers. 'Runner' they said she was. Delivering messages for the revolution. That was last night."

"I didn't know," Rubain said.

The woman drew her hand from her pocket and shoved something at him. "I know you're the man who keeps books. Trevy said so. It's just a small one, it shouldn't be hard for you to hide. Just my family tree, our old family diary. My old granddad who died on the barricades last week. My baby, she died after birthing, I was going to name her Anily. Just names, see? You can tuck it away somewhere, don't you think? Or burn it, I don't care, just can't have it on me anymore, or I'll burn on a bone fire too. But if you can keep them, well, it'd be a shame to forget about Anily and old granddad."

Then she let go of the book and stepped away from the stoop. Rubain shut the door.

He ate her little diary that night, all the names of the inconsequential Neblesse family sliding down his throat with ale and a moldy slice of cottager's bread. He burned the binding and ate the pages and they settled in his gut, random as his innards.

Rubain had seen human innards only once, just before the beginning of the revolution. That was when they first constructed the checkpoints at the Spine, where the laborers were forced to show a pass—I live here, I'm going there, then I'm coming back here again. He had gone to meet his father at a checkpoint and the old man, pushing impatiently through the crowd, raised his arm suddenly.

The soldier on duty at the checkpoint had used his sword to show Rubain all his father's innards then, thinking that the raised hand held a weapon, instead of the triumphant acquisition of an increasingly rare bit of fresh meat. WHOLE HUGE PARAGRAPH MISSING

Trevy came to see him that evening, after Rubain had barely washed the ink from around his mouth and gone to bed.

"I don't have room for any more propaganda," he said, fingering the offering from the revolution's leader. Privately he suspected he couldn't digest the old leather it was scratched out on.

"But this is important," Trevy said. His beard ran unshaven down his neck, wild as thorns. "You said you could keep the books, that it was your contribution to the revolution. You're the only one brave enough to do it."

Rubain almost told him then, because it might be nice just to say it out loud—*Trevy, I've been eating the books*—and have one person look back at him and understand how the pages had become meat to him.

"We've had to move again," Trevy said. "The bastards found us at

Pretemp, and tore down the barricade there. We've set up our headquarters at Frevaun. Send a runner there if you need to find me. We've got a way into the castle through the kitchens now. There will be an assassination before the summer is up, mark my words."

Rubain looked at him. He could tell Treyv about the storehouse. But Treyv would probably want to liberate it, and then what would there be to eat?

That night Rubain took up a bit of parchment, watered his ink, and wrote. He thought of calling a runner to go to Frevaun, the small boy next door who was quick and missing two teeth and liked running from soldiers. Then he remembered the woman speaking of the girl who had burned on the bone fire, and the storehouse full of books, and his stomach growled. Instead, he ate what he had written.

They know where you are settled in his stomach like a stone, and the ink tasted like rotten meat.

On another piece of paper he wrote *Frevaun*, and this one he left between the third and fourth pages of a book near the door to the storehouse, a book he never ate. He settled in theology, eating up some ancient, illuminated manuscripts. The paper was heavy parchment, so it was slow going.

The barricade at Frevaun fell two weeks later, and with it Treyv's headquarters. They butchered his men on the spot, but dragged him out of the hiding space in the wall and burned him to death on a bone fire in the plaza. People watched from their windows as Treyv howled of freedom and justice, and Rubain heard one soldier remark later how the revolutionary's bones danced merrily enough on the hot tinder when he was dead.

At one point, when Treyv's eyes were beginning to bleed, they met Rubain's: the sideways smile of a boy who wiped snot on his pants and threw stones for bets re-emerged for one moment, and Rubain wept for him.

• • •

As summer lingered the city stank with the marrow of the enormous fish, perpetually rotting, a smell of blood meal and mold. Flies swarmed like thunderheads, and the air was a constant chatter of swallows gorging themselves, perching high on the bones and swooping down with their beaks open. Some children took to bringing

them down with sling-shots, tying the birds to their belts to carry home for eating later. Streaks of blood mixed with the dust on their bare, brown legs, a thick filth like black stockings, the worn tat of desperation.

Rubain's hunger grew so great it could no longer be satisfied by nightly visits to the storehouse. He stole books boldly now, securing them in a pack on his back, and spent his days and nights devouring their pages slowly, incessantly, as he went about his daily tasks. He couldn't make a large enough fire in his hearth to burn them all at once so the empty covers lay scattered around his house and workshop, their spines tattered and skeletal. He read each page before he ate it, fingering a loop of green thread or a bone comb, picking at the parchment scabs of Majole where the secrets lay hidden, almost forgotten.

He had never been particularly interested in the absent books, since they had disappeared while he was still young. That had been his father's lament. Now, as he devoured them, he began to understand the leaves and stones. When he could no longer read its books, Rubain's father kept those rough pieces of Majole as his literature.

Another assassination attempt was ruined, and the would-be assassin burned too. The air was hazy with smoke day and night, and the ruins of bone fires smoldered on nearly every street corner come morning, the ashes sifting into the cobblestones, muddied with offal, becoming a gray mortar. The revolutionaries, starved and broken, tore down their own barricades. The soldiers came into lower Majole, quelling with beatings what little unrest remained.

The woman who had brought her family diary came to warn him.

"Some people told them there's a fellow keeping the books," she said. "They gave you up for bread and soup. Everyone knows who you are by now. It's only a matter of time. You should go."

Rubain smiled. "Where would I go? Everything I keep belongs here. It makes no sense to take it away from Majole."

She sighed. "Anyway, it'll be over soon I expect. We're too hungry to fight, and no one much cares anymore."

She turned to leave.

"I remember," said Rubain. "I remember about Anily, and your grandfather."

"Do you?" she answered, without looking back. "I hardly think of them anymore."

That night he woke up to the sounds of screaming from down the street. Peering out his window, he saw soldiers at work beating down doors, dragging their inhabitants out, asking rough questions,

bruising faces, locking them in the prison wagon. There wouldn't have been time for him to leave even if he wanted to. They had already known where he was.

Rubain gathered an armful of books, strapped them to his back in his pack, and climbed out of his upper window onto the roof. The bone fires were quiet for once, that night. The prison wagon waited down the street, cushioned inside with the bruised and bleeding. He looked out over the city.

As the night crept past he ate the words of the poet who wrote, I broke my voice for the first time on the knife's edge of her name. He ate the recounting of the balmy autumn twelve years before, when the heat stayed until the rains came, and then the mold got into the stores. He ate the bird scratches of a symphony like a tide.

He heard the thud of his door being kicked in. It was unnecessary: he had left it unlocked.

He reached down, tore another page, and shoved it into his mouth. He ate another, and another, while candles were lit and people crept out to watch the soldiers clamber onto the roof toward him.

When the soldiers finally reached Rubain they found his lips so blackened with ink that for a moment they believed him diseased. Someone had thought to slip the lock on the prison wagon while they were distracted, and emptied it of its prisoners. Rubain rode alone through the streets of Majole in the prison wagon that night, and stood alone on the bone fire the next morning.

He looked out between the sheaves of fire to see people watching. They whispered behind their hands—wasn't he the one keeping all the books? The one who went mad and stood on his roof and ate their pages? The Shy Lieutenant?

Someone spat at the fire under his feet. "*That* for your revolution."

"I know your stories," he murmured to himself as his legs caught fire. "I am fat with you."

When the flames had shrunken his skin so much that it could not contain him any more, Rubain burst open like an overstuffed sack, and in that moment before darkness tasted wine and meat and saffron and quince, and was full with it at last.

The crowd shrank back as they were pelted with what he had been made of. Then their hands grabbed at it, marveling at the feel, and they stuffed it into their pockets and shirts and ran to the last few safe places to read it, to piece it all together the best they could, remembering slowly. Some of it, caught in the flames, withered and burned,

but some of it caught on the updraft of the smoke and then got into the air. Shivering and rattling as loose pages will, the devoured books of Majole drifted down over its rooftops and fish bones.

There were no human bones when the fire went out. All that remained of Rubain were charred bits of parchment, the edge of an illumination, a few words of poetry, and ash. •

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"There aren't any plague towns," Molly says, and all the girls look at her. "Not anymore. Now there are parking lots and municipal buildings."

Molly Dreams of Dolphins

Laura E. Price

"Moira, are you coming to dinner?" Nichole asks from the doorway.

Molly turns from her physics book, blinking. "Yeah—let me get my coat." She sounds groggy, as though she's been asleep, and she's not sure how long it's been since she said anything out loud.

The five girls from the third floor of the dormitory troop down the stairs and out into the cold air, aimed for the dining hall and something that might look like pork, but will smell like chicken. The other four girls indifferently discuss what the dinner meat might actually be while Molly, as usual, looks up into the deepening blue of the night sky, wanting to see the first stars appear.

"What's going on over there?" asks Bethany. Bethany lives next door to Molly—there is an empty room between them, so they aren't exactly next door neighbors, but it's close enough.

Molly looks at the area Bethany nods to, her hands shoved deep into her coat pockets. Her thumb rubs over and over her keys, but otherwise she stands still.

They are just past the campus chapel, where once upon a time services were held and weddings were performed. On the sidewalk in front of the chapel is a bulletin board. Huddled in front of it, under the plywood roof that houses a light, stands a group of ten or fifteen people, reading what is posted on three panels of corkboard, covered

by thin plastic to protect it from the wind, the rain, the vandals.

The people are quiet. Two of them turn and walk away, off campus, silent, not touching.

"Come on," says Nichole quietly, and the girls follow her. "I think it's the list. You know."

"Oh, God," says one of the other girls, startled, and Molly gropes in her memory for a name—not Cathy, not even remotely like Cathy, a flower? Lily? Rose? Violet. That's right, like the girl with the gum in the Willy Wonka book. Molly takes a deep breath as Violet asks, "Why are they putting them up here? We're not near any of the plague towns."

"There aren't any plague towns," Molly says, and all the girls look at her. "Not anymore. Now there are parking lots and municipal buildings." And one or two containment centers, like spas. No, sanitariums, where people used to go for TB or to recuperate from a war.

"The news said they were putting the lists up at all the colleges and all the hospitals. That's just what they decided," Nichole says.

Bethany nods. "I guess if I'd known someone... you know, I'd want to know what happened to them."

One by one, softly, the other girls agree. Except Molly, silent again. She is looking at the stars, catching her breath.

• • •

She dreams of Rinnie that night, of course. She knew she would; three or four times a week Rinnie is in Molly's dreams. Sometimes they do things, go places, are small again or suddenly much older. Sometimes Rinnie is just in the background while Molly kisses a faceless boy (whose tongue crumbles to pieces in her mouth) or searches endlessly in a disorganized, horribly expanding backpack for a pencil.

Tonight they are back in Mr. Volchek's house. Molly knows that Rinnie is somewhere upstairs, but she herself is in the downstairs hallway, looking for the linen closet.

What are you doing? she'd asked Rinnie when she came home from scavenging with Del and Sam.

I've been keeping an eye on Mr. Volchek's house, Rinnie replied. I think he might be dead.

Molly knows, in the dream, that Mr. Volchek is lying in his reclining chair in the living room, looking asleep.

She finds the linen closet and pulls out all the flat sheets in it.

They go on and on forever, like a highway, like light through space. White and red and blue and green and white again and stripes and plaids and then Rinnie behind her, saying, Look what I found, and between her finger and thumb is the photograph, the two little kids in Halloween costumes, the smaller one smiling eagerly—

Molly wakes herself up and takes deep breaths, one after the other, lying on her back.

She needs space between herself and the dream; she doesn't want to go back to sleep and end up in a recurring loop of memory. So she turns on a light and sits up in bed, looks around the room. Moira's room.

Their parents named them Moira Colleen and Catherine Aine, and they named each other Molly and Rinnie. Moira's room is decorated with things Molly found, things she thought a college girl would have: a Georgia O'Keefe poster she found at a garage sale, soft blue and gray linens she bought from Goodwill, and a computer from an estate auction. A vase that she got from the same garage sale as the O'Keefe poster, full of flowers—jasmine tonight, but always something she can smell—sits on her dresser. Nichole has allergies and can never stay in Moira's room for very long. A poster of Christina's World, by Andrew Wyeth, is the only thing she bought new, and it hangs over the dresser. Christina isn't what Molly thinks of when she looks at it, though.

On the very end of the dresser is one small pile of stuff; one little clump of chaos at the edge of Moira's neat existence. Keys on a ring, an old Swiss Army knife, and a small flashlight. Molly's things, that she keeps in her pockets.

Moira's room is at the end of this wing of the dorm. When she has her blinds open, she can see the chapel. Sometimes, when she is sick of equations and blurry-eyed from abstract theory, she looks out the window and imagines girls, two in every room, gathering in this one to watch wedding parties spill out of the doors of the chapel.

She stares at the drawn blinds, then gets her books and studies the rest of the night. There isn't enough space between her and her dream.

• • •

"I just don't think they can be reintegrated," Leslie says at breakfast. "They blockaded the plague towns, what, ten years ago? It's like being in prison too long—you adapt to the artificial environment and

then can't adapt back to the normal one."

"There aren't that many survivors, anyway," says Nichole.

Molly eats her eggs and looks at the girls. Nichole has dark hair and features that are soft, like her voice. Nichole isn't shy, just quiet. Serene. Leslie has lots of opinions; Violet is easily startled. Bethany peers over her glasses at her bio-chem book as she eats cereal. Bethany wants to be a doctor. She and Molly are the only girls on their floor who aren't in the nursing program. Nursing is a faster degree, and nurses are as scarce as doctors, anymore.

"They're mostly carriers, anyway, aren't they?" asks Violet.

"Well, that's why they're kept at the centers now," replies Bethany, still reading.

Molly keeps her eyes on her eggs and hears her own, oddly unfamiliar, voice. "They're not all at the centers."

"What do you mean?" asks Violet.

"There were people slipping through the barricades for years before they razed the towns," Molly says. "If you were healthy and caught behind the walls, wouldn't you try to get out?"

"No," Leslie says immediately. "Not if I could be carrying plague. Not if I might kill people or infect someplace that was clean."

Bethany glances up from her book. "There was nowhere clean, Les. Plague was everywhere. It was just more concentrated in some places, like cities, so that's what they decided to quarantine. Made themselves feel better."

Nichole absently taps her spoon against the table as she says, "There was a man who lived next to us, when I was little. He caught the plague from his wife—she traveled a lot, before they had transportation really regulated. I remember the trucks that came—big, black armored things, and the men in the enviro-suits. They looked like movie monsters, the old kind where you see the zipper going up the back of the costume? Not real at all. They carried Mr. and Mrs. Winston out of their house, because they were both too weak to move, and took their kids." She pauses, the spoon still between her fingers. "We were all quarantined for a while, but eventually the men went away. We never found out what happened to the Winstons."

The girls are silent, staring at their food. Bethany is staring at her book, her eyes not moving over the words. Molly sees this, but her head fills with the sound of the armored trucks grinding past in the dark, pausing to retrieve what was left for them on porches and corners, the occasional crashes and thunks of the body collectors breaking

down the doors of houses whose windows had no candles, darkness signaling death inside.

She sees Rinnie, sitting next to the window, watching the candle stub they were nursing along, hoping that tonight they would hear the muffled whap of the supply bag hitting the door. The candlelight caught in her red hair and turned it coppery, reflected muted gold on the surface of the Volchek's picture in her hand.

"I can't imagine living in a plague town," Violet says. "I can't imagine being surrounded by the dying and not being able to get out."

• • •

She avoids the chapel as much as she can during the day, until she finally has to go back to the dorm. She stares at the sidewalk as she walks past, eyes fixed down, counting cracks.

In her room, the chapel and the bulletin board are framed in her window. One lone person, bundled so that Molly can't tell if it's a man or a woman, studies the sheets closely, leaning toward them.

"Hey, Moira, do you have a paper clip?" asks Violet from the doorway.

"Um, yeah, hang on," Molly says, moving from the window to her desk, where she rummages for paper clips. Violet comes into the room and stands behind her, looking out the window.

"I kind of wish they'd take the lists down," Violet says. "They've got everyone talking about the plague so much."

Molly hands Violet a handful of clips. "Is that a bad thing?" she asks carefully.

"No... not entirely, but..." Violet shoves her hair behind her ears and then says, "It's always there, though, under everything, and talking about it—I don't want everything to be about it. You know?"

"Yeah," Molly says. The person at the bulletin board is sitting on the concrete before it, back to the lists, head pillowied on drawn-up knees, shoulders shaking. "But I think everything is about it, now."

"Whatever happened to the good old days, when we'd all be talking about how we lost our virginity and who got drunk and puked at the frat party?" Violet jokes. "Thanks for the clips," she says when Molly doesn't reply, and leaves the room.

• • •

It could have been worse. Aside from screwing a thirteen-year-old

girl as a bribe, he was normal. Not really old—maybe seventeen, Molly thinks—and not awful looking or smelling. He had brown hair, she remembers, his face like a lot of other soldiers' faces, and he didn't hit her or try to hurt her while he did it. He didn't ask her to do anything but lay there—nothing weird or nasty. Just kiss him, have sex with him, and he'd let her through. She was healthy, right? He'd even used a condom.

So it could have been worse. There were kids she knew, older kids in the gangs, raped by soldiers when they were out past curfew. Other kids just disappeared sometime after midnight. Then there were the kids who were hurt in the daylight, by other kids, by the adults who were left. She and Rinnie had been lucky—just living behind Mary King's Cross used up all their bad luck.

All those kids swore they'd never forget the faces or the bodies or the smells of the person who hurt them. Molly, walking across campus or through the dorm some days, sees boys with brown hair and soldiers' faces and feels her entire body, inside and out, lurch... is that him? Then they turn and they aren't, but she spends hours reminding herself what he looked like, reminding herself that those boys aren't him, because she's always certain for those few seconds that he will see her and remember her.

Lots of soldiers at college, now, retraining. Violet and Leslie go out with boys sometimes—Nichole never goes out, and Bethany says she's too busy. Molly tries to be invisible to boys, worried that if he recognizes her he might tell someone who she really is. Where she came from.

She dreams about it sometimes. How he asked her to kiss him, and if she'd ever kissed a boy before. Then how he moved on top of her, and how it hurt, but not as much as she'd thought, and the whole time she thought, I can handle this, it could be worse. In her dreams, Rinnie sits in a corner and watches them, and even when Molly turns her face away, she knows Rinnie is there.

• • •

In her chemistry lab, Molly hears voices. This is probably because she hasn't slept the past two nights.

Why are you doing this? Why do you have to bring this stuff home all the time?

"I find things," she whispers, silently, to her microscope. "That's what I do now."

The people who owned it are dead—I don't want to live in a graveyard.

"The people who owned everything in this house are dead," Molly says to her lunch, eating alone in the cafeteria. "I live here, too."

No, you don't. You live out there. I live in here, and I don't leave.

But Rinnie hadn't looked at the house, full of things; she looked at the picture, cupped in her hand.

Molly rolls over in bed, turning away from the voice, trying to think of something else, something that will let her fall asleep. Her head aches and her skin feels prickly.

She can hear Bethany and Nichole, studying across the hall in Nichole's room. Their voices move up and down, soothing but not quite lulling her to sleep; she drifts up through her head and along the hallway to Rinnie's room, sees her lying on the bed with her feet crossed at the ankles.

I know you're leaving.

I'm not leaving, Molly said, shocked. She had barely thought of leaving.

Of course you are. You have to. You have to leave me. I'm just dead weight.

You're not, Rinnie, you're... you're okay, right, in the house, you're fine—

I'm fine. Of course I'm fine. She gestured at the pictures she had found and had scattered all across her room. I have the whole world, here.

Molly turns restlessly, not quite waking, hearing Nichole and Bethany talking.

"... just the name people gave it because it was like plague," Bethany says. "It spread too fast for them to find a cure..."

"... doctors who died?" Nichole's voice is always soft, like Molly remembers her father's voice the day she hid in the hall closet and listened for his voice, and her mother's, because she was scared.

"... bioterrorism. Some maniac..."

...you'd think they'd have a cure for it. Dad sounded irritable, tired, sad.

...aren't even sure they want to give us supplies, why would they...

And then the closet is gone, and Molly and Rinnie are in the back yard, rolling their mother into the last set of clean sheets. Rinnie cried without making a sound, water dripping off her face and chin. Molly was dirty, covered in mud, sneezing every three minutes as the dust got

up her nose, wiping snot on her arm.

Rinnie didn't talk to her at all that day. But that night when there were no more parents, nothing but Molly and Rinnie and the big house where they'd grown up, Mom and Dad everywhere they looked, Rinnie came into Molly's room and stroked her hair, soothed her to sleep by talking about... something—

She pulls herself out of sleep, out of sorts, rubs her eyes and drags her hands through her hair. The hall is silent, not even Nichole and Bethany murmuring over their books anymore. Molly turns on the light and gets out of bed.

Her parents won't be on any list; they are buried in the back yard of the old house and weren't tallied by the body collectors. Mr. Volchek will be on the list, if he had any relatives to look for it. Rinnie kept an eye on all their neighbors. They got really good at wrapping people in sheets.

Molly walks to the window and opens the blinds. The bulletin board sits quietly in its spotlight, deserted.

Rinnie stopped talking to her after a while. Stopped cleaning the house, stopped making soup, stopped arguing about the junk Molly dragged into the house. Sometimes Molly thinks Rinnie did it to make her leave, but mostly she knows Rinnie did it because Molly was going to leave.

She had stood in what was left of a drugstore—toppled shelves and broken windows, because no matter what was going on, teenagers were destructive and unoriginal—watching Sam and Del, her little scav friends, digging around for whatever they could find. And she thought, I'm going to die back here, and I don't want to.

She told the school that her records were lost in a fire. That isn't uncommon. She tested clean. She studies hard and never goes home for holidays, which isn't uncommon, either; everyone studies hard so they can be of service faster.

She shuts the blinds, sits heavily on the bed. She could put on some clothes, her boots, her coat. She could slip downstairs and out the door, and no one would ever know if she'd gone for a walk or if she'd gone to look at the list.

Molly shuts off the light and crawls under the blankets in the dark.

You have to leave me, she hears. I know you're going to leave me. She rolls onto her stomach and puts the pillow over her head, trying to block out the voice, but it doesn't stop.

Do you remember, Molly? asks the voice. Rinnie's voice. Do you

remember—we saw dolphins. And it is that night again, and Rinnie is stroking her hair and saying, Remember? We went to the beach three summers ago, and the dolphins swam right up to us.

"They swam right up to you," Molly corrects quietly from under her pillow.

To us. You were there, too. Think about the dolphins, Molly, and go to sleep.

Rinnie touched one as it swam by them, and all day afterward they looked at each other, and one of them would say, We saw dolphins, and they'd both grin like morons. At the end of the day they sat up on the roof of the rented cottage to look at the stars, and Molly told Rinnie that someday she wanted to be an astronaut, and Rinnie said, You'd be a really good astronaut, Moll.

Rinnie caresses her hair, gently, like a breeze, and slowly the horrible pictures slip away out of Molly's head for a while. Eventually she falls asleep, and she dreams of dolphins. •

Science From Rebecca

Kin Man Young Tai

Rebecca speaking her science disturbs
like Hagar, Abraham's journey in faith
and you, with a muse older than all your books.
Your readings had long enabled this
with fragments of myth or fancy
anxious for the new facts of eggs and DNA.
Reaching in and laying out your stock
you find fragments are only that
your eyes passing from stomachs to sky.
Simple the god promise and the facts harsh
her talk charms and turns you without mercy
to find an antidote nearby and soon.
Your hand closing about a stone tells you
that though god fancied, you are also clay. •

The beast's ears flapped against its head. Suvinder looked up and remembered what his mother had told him, about seeing it for the first time. Serenity—that was her word for it. *There would be serenity*, she'd said.

Mourning Sickness

Robert Weston

The conference floor was so awash with noise that Suvinder thought he'd misheard. "Sorry?" he said, "Sarah? I don't think I know any—hold on, are you from Home and Garden? Actually, I've been meaning to call you guys about our—"

"No, no," said the voice, "Suvinder, it's Sarah. U of T Sarah. Remember?" She paused. Then, as if it was necessary, she added, "Peter's wife."

Suvinder wasn't sure of his expression, but he was grateful for the physical anonymity of the telephone. "Sarah Bateman. Or I guess I mean Milligrew, don't I? Sarah Milligrew. I have to admit, I hadn't heard from either of you in so long, I'd written you off. So, um. How are you? Well, I hope."

"Actually, no, I'm not so good." She said something else, but the HBO demo started nearby and her voice was lost.

Suvinder hollered into the phone. "What? Look, I can barely hear you. I'm at this TV convention and there's a—"

Sarah spoke slowly. "It's Peter, Suvinder. He had a stroke."

Suvinder had nothing to say in response. He stared at the wall of monitors that lay beyond the independent producers' booth—a massive barricade of promotional light and sound.

"Suvinder? Did you hear what I said? Peter had a stroke, and

then—and we lost him.”

“Lost him? Wait, that doesn’t—we’re not even forty, Sarah, he couldn’t’ve—”

“It was his condition. He lost his father only last year.”

“His condition?”

“The funeral’s tomorrow morning. I’m sorry, Suvinder. I’m sorry I couldn’t find you sooner.”

As abruptly as she had appeared—as an unidentified number on his cellular phone—Sarah was gone. The details of the ceremony and the news that Peter had suffered all his life from a congenital heart disease came from Peter’s older brother, someone Suvinder had never met.

The moment the phone was back in his breast pocket, Suvinder’s vision swam. He was forced to steady himself against a chunk of the feeble pasteboard that was everywhere.

“Hey, how’d it go with the Food guys?” It was Bill, Suvinder’s partner at Up-Start Productions. Bill had been off on another pitch—trying to sell a collection of skiing accidents to Xtreme TV—while Suvinder had met with two buyers from The Food Network. Up-Start’s first-and-only pilot was something called “Street Chefs”.

Suvinder couldn’t answer. His legs wobbled, the pasteboard gave way and he crouched to the floor to keep from falling down.

To Bill, collapsing anywhere was unthinkable, bad for business. Nevertheless, he managed to make sense of it. “So it went pretty badly, huh?” he said, eyeing the HBO display, “Yeah. Me too.”

Suvinder shook his head as if he needed something dislodged.

Bill pursed his lips. “No?” he asked, his voice rising optimistically, “You mean, ‘no, it didn’t go badly’? C’mom, Vinnie, don’t fool around. Are you serious? They actually wanna buy it?”

Suvinder kept on shaking his head. Finally he said “They didn’t buy it.”

“So what happened?”

“I got a call from a friend, an old friend. She called to tell me about another old friend of mine. Who died.”

“Died?”

“I have to go to the funeral.”

Bill put a hand on Suvinder’s shoulder. “Sure, buddy. As soon as we get back.”

Suvinder stood up and tried to moisten his mouth. “No,” he said,

“The funeral’s tomorrow. And it’s in Vancouver. I’ll just have to change my ticket.”

"Yeah, okay, maybe. But listen, we still have two days here and what if—"

Bill was interrupted by three enormous security guards. They surrounded Suvinder. All three were monstrous, but they were dwarfed by the great thing that loomed behind them. "Excuse me, sir?" one of them said to Suvinder, "But is this your elephant?"

The beast's ears flapped against its head. Suvinder looked up and remembered what his mother had told him, about seeing it for the first time. Serenity—that was her word for it. There would be serenity, she'd said. He told himself he'd have to call her and admit she was right. Oddly, he found himself smiling at the security guard. It was a listless, tight-lipped grin, but a smile nonetheless. "Yes," he said, "I suppose that's my elephant."

Bill backed away, holding his hands up in apology. "Sorry, buddy," he said, "I didn't realize it hit you so hard."

One of the guards took Suvinder firmly by the arm. "Sir, I'm afraid we'll have to ask you leave. On behalf of Las Vegas Convention Centre, we'd like to express our sincerest regret for your loss."

• • •

January in Las Vegas was hardly the height of tourist season. Standing outside the convention centre in nothing more than a business suit, Suvinder could see his breath, puffing out of his mouth in short-lived clouds.

He hurried back toward his hotel—the dilapidated and oft-neglected Riviera. His elephant loped quietly behind him. At the hotel, he tipped the bellhop five dollars to watch the animal while he checked-out and retrieved his luggage. He swooped indoors, past the sirens of god-knows-how-many slot machines, and found the woman at the front desk to be suitably rueful and obliging, but as she handed Suvinder his receipt, he caught her gazing warily over his shoulder.

Outside again, he tried to reason with the elephant. "Listen," he said, whispering up toward the beast's ear. He hoped the thing would understand if he spoke clearly and with a gentle timbre. "I need to catch a cab to the airport. It'll be a bit of a chore with you standing right beside me. So please, just wait here until I find one. Can you do that?"

The elephant blinked.

Suvinder coaxed the beast around the corner, away from the twinkling lights of the Riviera marquee. He raised his hands to the

elephant's face, a gesture any domesticated animal would comprehend. "All right? I want you to stay. Right here. Okay?" Suvinder backed toward the street and thankfully his elephant remained in the shadows.

When he flagged down a cab, the driver was all smiles. He graciously got out and hefted Suvinder's battered luggage into the trunk. "To the airport?" he asked.

"Yeah, that's right."

As they pulled away from the curb, the driver whistled along to throwaway pop that hissed from the radio. On the dashboard, there was an ornamental word—JESUS—molded to resemble a fish.

"How you holding up?"

Suvinder only half heard. "Sorry, what?"

"You okay?"

"Uh huh."

"You sure?"

"I'm fine. I just—I don't want to miss my plane."

"You sure that's all?"

"Yeah. That's it. Why?"

The driver tapped the rearview mirror and Suvinder turned around. His elephant was lumbering along the shoulder of the road; a few of the other cars were forced to swerve to avoid it. The woman in the next car back glared through the windscreens. Suvinder slumped in his seat.

The driver chuckled. "You never been through any kind of loss before, have you?"

Suvinder shook his head.

The driver nodded. "That's what I thought," he said, "But count yourself lucky. My first time was when my dog died. I was only a kid and I was dumb enough to think my folks'd gone and bought me a new pet. In the end, it was just like going through the whole thing twice."

Suvinder grimaced. "That's awful."

"Oh yeah. I loved that dog more than my own mother. Since then, I've had more elephants than I care to remember. I tried outrunning one or two of them, but really the only thing you can do is work through it."

"That makes sense."

"Anyway, if you're like me, ol' jumbo won't stick around more than a few days."

Suvinder sighed. "Oh," he said, "A few days." It was longer than he'd anticipated.

"Sure, a few days, no more than a week. 'Course sometimes you hear about chronic cases, but those folks have problems, serious problems—psychological problems, y'know? That's not you, right? You look pretty put-together to me."

"Maybe. I don't know." Suvinder looked out the window. He could see the long shadow of his elephant, flitting over the roadside cacti.

"It always helps to talk about it. If you like. With this traffic, we'll be on the road at least another—maybe ten or twelve minutes."

"You want to know what happened?"

"If you feel up to it."

Suvinder looked at the back of the driver's head. Was this man genuinely concerned or simply morbid and curious? Suvinder decided it didn't matter either way. "It was my best friend," he admitted, "The funeral's tomorrow."

The driver looked in the rearview again. His eyes moved from Suvinder and then to the elephant that trailed them, several car lengths behind.

"We were best friends at university," Suvinder went on, "Right from week one. We did everything together. We both studied film and we produced a few shorts together—good stuff too, considering the shitty equipment we had to work with." Suvinder took a deep breath. "It turns out he had a heart disease, something serious. He had it all the time and he never told me. Nobody ever told me."

"Geez," said the driver, whistling a single, descending note, "No wonder you got yourself such a big fellah. Almost there now, by the way. You know which terminal?"

The Las Vegas airport loomed ahead. When the taxi slowed to climb the entry ramp, Suvinder's elephant closed the gap.

"Doesn't matter which terminal," Suvinder commented darkly, "International, I guess. I'm flying with Air Canada." When the driver didn't ask for any more information, Suvinder went on with his story. "There was a girl. Her name was Sarah and she was a drama student, an actress—or at least she aspired to be. Peter and I—man—we clawed over each other tooth-and-nail to get her in every one of our shitty little movies. More than likely, she was the only reason they were remotely bearable."

"You don't say," said the driver, turning around in his seat.

Suvinder hadn't noticed the taxi had stopped. "She dated us both. After we graduated, we agreed things would stay on the level. We'd all remain friends—just friends. But then, well," Suvinder paused to

knock his head, lightly, against the glass. "Then they both moved across the country and I stayed put in Toronto. I guess I thought I had something good going at the time. With my work, I mean."

The driver opened his door and popped the trunk and Suvinder finally caught on. His elephant was loitering at the entrance to international departures and a man in an orange vest was madly waving his arms, urging the cab driver to drive away.

• • •

Changing his ticket to Toronto-via-Vancouver wasn't as expensive as Suvinder expected. Air Canada offered a generous bereavement discount that was a tenth of the price, plus the usual service charges and airport tax. The airline's charity was less surprising, however, when the clerk informed Suvinder that the cargo-plane charges for simultaneously shipping an elephant would be triple the cost of a standard fare. Suvinder whispered a prayer and handed over his AMEX card. After producing the unsaleable pilot for "Street Chefs", his charge account was fast approaching overdraft. Miraculously, the tickets cleared, but the first available flight didn't leave until the middle of the night.

When his plane finally set down in Vancouver, Suvinder was already too late to attend the ceremony. Instead, he would go straight to Peter's burial. He rented the cheapest car on the airport lot, briefly consulted a roadmap and then sped recklessly toward West Vancouver with his elephant struggling to keep up.

Capilano View Cemetery was a gorgeous expanse of greenery cut through by winding roads, evergreens and bare oak trees. The north-shore mountains loomed across the bay and the Vancouver air was like a moist sponge, a welcome change after the desert cold of Nevada. The cemetery grounds were so large they seemed derelict and it took Suvinder some time to locate the plot.

Chairs—thirty or forty of them—were set out in rows and most were already occupied. Suvinder was relieved to find that his was neither the largest nor the smallest elephant in attendance. When he joined the group, his animal took its place among the others, milling around an idle bulldozer, presumably the one used to excavate the grave.

He found a seat at the rear. Beside him was a man of girth, dressed in a suit that was comically small and ill-fitted. He wore a thick moustache and his eyes were deeply bloodshot. "Go ahead," he said, a moment after Suvinder had already sat down, "There's no one sitting there."

"Thanks," said Suvinder, leaning forward in an attempt to catch the man's eye.

But the man didn't look up from the ground. He only said, "I was his secretary."

"You worked for Peter?"

"Two years. Almost two years. I never would have thought—" he trailed off and threw a backward glance over his shoulder, toward the herd. "That's mine over there. That big old African. Who'd of thought, hey?"

Suvinder looked over his shoulder. The man's elephant was even larger than his own and Suvinder felt his cheeks colour with an unexpected pang of shame.

The large man sniffled and cupped his mouth in his hand. "Never in a million years. Never—never, ever—would I've expected to show up at the guy's funeral. He was so damn young."

"I guess it was a surprise for a lot of people."

"Yeah. How'd you know him?"

"We went to school together."

Peter's secretary slung a heavy arm round Suvinder's shoulders. His grip was stifling; his breath smelled of rye whiskey. "You go way back, hey? Looks like you're holding up pretty well."

"I'm coping."

"Good for you." The man used a thick finger to draw an invisible circle in front of his face. "What's all this blubbery get you? Not a god-damn thing. Honestly, I only feel worse. And I'll bet the damn African's ready to dog me for weeks and weeks." He blew out a syrupy breath and the strength of his embrace faltered. Gently, like a drowsy child, he placed his head on Suvinder's shoulder and closed his eyes.

An uncle Suvinder had never heard of spoke at length. Only when he made reference to Peter's "adoring wife and family", did Suvinder catch sight of Sarah, who until then had been just another dark figure among many. She was sitting at the far end of the front row, evidently between Peter's mother and the brother Suvinder had spoken to on the phone. When the uncle's eulogy deteriorated into tears, the minister took over. He concluded the ceremony just as a light rain began to fall. To bring him out of his stupor, Suvinder slapped the secretary's meaty thigh.

"Sorry," said the large man, wringing his hands.

The coffin was lowered into the ground and the mourners began

to leave. A number of them filed between Sarah and her husband's grave. Hands were reassuringly squeezed; soft words were exchanged; Sarah and her mother were kissed lightly on the cheek, again and again.

Peter's secretary didn't bother saying goodbye to anyone. He rose suddenly and lurched toward the cars.

"Are you sure you're okay to drive?" Suvinder called after him.

"I'm fine," he replied, "Tell them I'll skip the reception. I'm going home." The man found his car—a rusted Mazda—and puttered away with his elephant thundering alongside. Suvinder kept his eye on the vehicle as long as he could. Just before the car moved out of sight, it veered drunkenly toward the shoulder. Responding quickly, the man's elephant trumpeted forward and the secretary swerved back on course. Suvinder smiled. He imagined the secretary would arrive home in one piece, just as long as he didn't get over Peter's death before he got there.

When Suvinder turned back, most of the mourners had left the gravesite. When he saw Peter's brother help his mother out of her seat and lead the old woman away, Suvinder moved forward.

When he was still a few feet behind her, Sarah turned. "I didn't think you'd made it," she said.

"It was a hassle getting here," Suvinder explained. "When you called I was in Las Vegas."

"Working?"

"Yeah."

"How's everything going for you?"

"It's going okay." Suvinder looked around at all the empty chairs. The cemetery's custodial staff was already clearing them away. "I certainly wasn't doing as well as Peter."

Sarah nodded. "Peter did pretty good for himself. But you know, Suvinder, he only ever ended up a moneyman. He never got his hands dirty and he never really produced anything. Not like you."

Suvinder almost laughed. "Never anything worthwhile, Sarah, believe me." He took the seat beside her—the place where Peter's brother had sat through the ceremony. Sarah's hair, pulled up from her face in an austere bun, smoothed her features and made her even younger than he remembered. Then he made out the lines in her face, the dark patches under her eyes. But no, those were always there, weren't they? It was as if she hadn't aged at all. "Who cares about what I'm doing?" he said, "What about you? How've you been, Sarah?

How're you holding up?"

"It's difficult, but I guess I'm okay. I knew about Peter's health right from the start, but like I said on the phone, it was still—"

"Sarah!" Peter's brother was calling from the last car still parked nearby, "Are you coming with us?"

Suvinder nodded to the man, but the gesture went unacknowledged.

"I'll stay a bit longer," Sarah called back, "You take mom back to the home. I'll meet you there soon."

Peter's brother climbed back into the car. When he pulled away, two of the biggest elephants Suvinder had ever seen—twins it seemed—followed the car down the path. Suvinder returned his attention to the grave. "He's really gone, isn't he?"

Sarah stood up abruptly. Suvinder felt compelled to do the same. As he rose, she threw her arms around his waist and burrowed her face in his chest. "I'm awful, Suvinder. You must think I'm a monster."

"What? No, don't say that, Sarah. You're not awful."

"I'm a terrible person."

Suvinder squeezed her. He stroked her back. He rested his chin on the top of her head. They were all motions he'd made once or twice before, years and years ago. But then he saw what she meant. There were only two elephants left on the grounds—his and hers. Sarah's elephant was small and frail. It moved with a crooked gait. It was sickly. And worse, it was walking away.

"Don't you see?" she said, her voice trembling and tight, "I told you. I'm not fit to live. It should be me in that box."

A moment later, Sarah's elephant hobbled into the evergreens and vanished. Suvinder watched it go. Part of him wanted to call after it, but what good would it do?

"What happened?" he asked, "Did something happen between you guys?"

"There's not much to tell. There's no 'big thing'. We just went in different directions. And we drifted." As if to demonstrate, she pushed Suvinder away. "You know what we did the week before he died? We talked about a divorce." She gestured to the open grave and laughed wretchedly. "I guess he was pretty serious about it, hey?"

Suvinder didn't know how to respond. He saw that now, with the chairs cleared away, his elephant was the last one on the grounds. It approached and stood a short distance off, its dark skin gleaming with rain.

"I'm quitting my job," he said.

“What?”

He sat down again and stared into the grave. "I'm gonna sell my half of the company—to my partner. He's wanted to have his own thing for a long time anyway. Besides, it's not all it's cracked up to be, Sarah. It really isn't." He looked up at her. "I was thinking I might move back out west, start again."

She offered him her hand. "Maybe now's a good time to start again."

"Maybe," he said. He put his hands on his knees and stood on his own. He walked to his elephant and touched it for the first time, running his fingers over the flank. The skin was warm and wet and rough. He turned back to Sarah. "C'mon," he said, "I'll give you a lift to the reception." •

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acknowledgements

The donors listed below have all given generously of their time and their money in the past year. We gratefully acknowledge their support.

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We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Publications Assistance Program and the Canada Magazine Fund toward our mailing, editorial and production costs. Thanks also to Alberta Community Development, Arts Development Branch; the Alberta Foundation for the Arts (a beneficiary of Alberta Lotteries); Alberta Community Employment Program; Advanced Education and Career Development; the Edmonton Arts Council (City of Edmonton); and the Canada Council for the Arts.

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